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RUSSIA ON MACRON'S DÉTENTE INITIATIVES

Marek Menkiszak

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MAIN POINTS

- Emmanuel Macron took office as President of the French Republic in May 2017. In his statements, he has proclaimed the need to engage in dialogue with Russia and work with it to build an architecture of trust and security in Europe. This approach resulted from his diagnosis of crisis in the Western community and the growing assertiveness of non-Western powers (including Russia), as well as his conviction that unless a *modus vivendi* with Moscow is found, it will be difficult to ensure the sovereignty and policy effectiveness of France and the entire European Union. The factors that have likely driven Macron also include a desire to promote French business in Russia, as well as an informal rivalry with Germany, which has traditionally played a central role in the EU's political and economic relations with that country.
- Macron's actions have been three-pronged. First, the channels of Russian-French dialogue (especially political dialogue) have been partially revived; second, this dialogue has been deepened and intensified (mainly on strategic issues, including regional conflicts, and in the economic sphere, including advanced technologies). Third, Macron has also tried to give a European dimension to the policy of dialogue with Russia by explaining it to other EU member states and urging them to support it. Here, his efforts had two active phases: the first came just after he took office as president in the spring of 2017, the next in the summer of 2019.
- However, despite friendly gestures from both sides and a very intensive French-Russian dialogue, including on regional problems (notably Syria, Libya and Ukraine), we cannot say that there has been any positive breakthrough in their bilateral relations, or that this dialogue has had any meaningful, tangible results. This is largely due to Moscow's attitude. It has welcomed Macron's initiatives, whose rhetoric has partly overlapped with Russia's, in the hope of exploiting

divisions within the Western community, but it has not made his efforts any easier. It has continued its aggressive policy towards European countries and the US, as well as Europe's external environment, with no intention of making any concessions in order to normalise relations. This has been consistent with its strategic culture and perception of its European partners, whom it has regarded as potentially willing to make political compromises. In doing so, it has been testing how far France is prepared to go in breaching the internal solidarity of NATO and the EU, and within its growing dispute with the US.

- Due to Russia's stance, Macron has been unable to overhaul of the EU's (let alone NATO's) policy towards Russia, and his actions have been increasingly perceived in Moscow as limited and inconsistent, intended to achieve public relations successes rather than tangible results. At the same time, France's unwillingness to violate the solidarity of its allies and its participation in the continued policy of sanctions against Russia have led to growing disappointment and exasperation in the Kremlin.
- The COVID-19 pandemic that has affected Europe and Russia since 2020, reducing direct contacts and travel, has made it difficult to maintain dialogue. But the process was dealt a serious blow anyway when Russian secret service officers used chemical weapons to attack Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny in August 2020. This led to another chill in the West's (including the EU's) relations with Russia and a temporary limitation of the French-Russian dialogue.
- Although no positive breakthrough in France's and the EU's relations with Russia has been achieved, Macron does not appear to have completely abandoned his attempt to bring about a détente in relations with Moscow, which is likely to maintain its passive-reactive attitude towards his efforts. However, the prospects for these initiatives depend on factors which are essentially beyond the

French president's control, primarily the policies of Joe Biden's new US administration, including US-European relations, as well as economic and political developments in Europe itself.

INTRODUCTION

On 14 May 2017, Emmanuel Macron, the leader of *La République En Marche* [Forward, Republic!], the centre-liberal political party he founded in 2016, was sworn in as President of the French Republic. In his election campaign, which centred on slogans of reform in France and the European Union, he devoted relatively little space to Russia, although he did signal his aim to return to dialogue with it. After taking office, however, the issue of troubled relations with Moscow became one of the more important themes of his presidency. In the following months and years, Macron presented a vague vision of overhauling the relationship between Russia & France and the entire EU, a return to dialogue and cooperation.

This text is divided into two parts. In the first, the author seeks to outline the political context in which Macron has operated, to reconstruct the assumptions of his concept with respect to Russia, and to analyse some of the steps he has taken to put it into practice. In the second part, the author sets out to reconstruct Russia's approach to Macron's rhetoric and policies and presents its attitude towards France under his rule. It concludes with a brief summary of the effects of both sides' attitudes on Russian-French relations to date and a reflection on their prospects.

It should be noted that this text does not seek to provide a comprehensive analysis of contemporary Russian-French relations or their recent history; nor does it focus on various important factors that form their context, in particular French-German, European-American, European-Chinese or Russian-Chinese relations, all of which have undoubtedly influenced the relationship between Paris and Moscow.

I. MACRON ON RUSSIA

1. Russia in Macron's concept

Russia was neither the only theme in Emmanuel Macron's rhetoric or policy, nor even a major one, especially in the early days.¹ Nevertheless, its importance began to grow over time. Still, the substance of his concept for a new formula of French and EU policy concerning relations with Russia remains unclear.

It can be inferred from the statements made by the French president and his special envoy for the architecture of security and trust with Russia, Ambassador Pierre Vimont, that the starting point is a diagnosis of crisis within the Western community (especially transatlantic relations and NATO, which is experiencing a 'brain death') on the one hand, and the rise of non-Western powers that are pursuing assertive policies, particularly China and Russia, on the other. Macron believes that the United States is strategically disengaging from Europe, and that its policies are becoming more of a challenge than an asset for the EU. In this situation, he has proclaimed the need to develop Europe's self-reliance ('strategic autonomy'), primarily in the area of security and defence as well as technology, so that it does not become an object of geopolitical struggle between the US on the one hand and China & Russia on the other.

Dialogue and cooperation with Russia are supposed to be a part of this policy, especially with regard to international crises and conflicts where Moscow's stance is crucial (such as in Syria, Libya and other African states, Iran, and Ukraine), and where common interests should be sought (e.g. in the fight against terrorism, energy and climate policy, space research, digital technologies, and in the Arctic). Macron also believes

¹ See President Macron's keynote speech at the University of Paris: 'Initiative for Europe, Speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the French Republic', Sorbonne, 26 September 2017, international.blogs.ouest-france.fr.

that although Russia feels threatened and deceived by the West as it has pressed ahead with the eastward expansion of Western institutions (the EU and especially NATO) at the US's initiative, it has no real alternative to cooperation with the EU as it lacks the capacity to become an independent superpower, and does not want to be China's 'little brother'.²

Ambassador Vimont, while speaking about France's political tactics towards Russia, added that where Russian interests pose a challenge, as in Africa, efforts should be made to create channels for deconfliction, and multilateral forums (the UN, the OSCE) should be used to prevent Russia taking *fait accompli* actions. In the case of Libya, this dialogue is expected to involve not only diplomats, but also secret services and the military. Another intended element of the French tactics was the establishment of a dialogue with representatives of the new generation of Russian government officials.³

2. Macron and Russia: the burden of the past

Macron's policy towards Russia does not come in a historical vacuum, but has been built on the centuries-long legacy of French policy towards that country (whether in the form of the Russian Empire, the USSR, or the Russian Federation). The decades after World War II, especially after the end of the Cold War, were of particular political significance.

- ² For more see 'Ambassadors' conference – Speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic', The French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, published by Embassy of France in Latvia, 27 August 2019, lv.ambafrance.org; 'Emmanuel Macron in his own words (English). The French president's interview with The Economist', The Economist, 7 November 2019, www.economist.com; 'Russia – Hearing of M. Pierre Vimont, the French President's special envoy for the architecture of security and trust with Russia, before the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Armed Forces Committee', The French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, published by Embassy of France in the United Kingdom, 19 February 2020, uk.ambafrance.org.
- ³ 'Audition de M. Pierre Vimont envoyé spécial du président de la république pour l'architecture de sécurité et de confiance avec la russie', NosSénateurs.fr, 19 February 2020, www.nossenateurs.fr.

France has never stopped thinking of itself as a European power, with special interests not only on our continent but also beyond – in Africa, the Middle East and the Far East. Even when it became a co-founder of NATO and the European Communities in the 1940s, it did not give up its distinct foreign and security policy, symbolised in particular by its withdrawal from NATO's military structures in 1966 (which it rejoined in 2009) and the development of its own nuclear forces. Despite a painful farewell to its former colonies in Africa and Asia (which was not always bloodless, as evidenced by the Indochinese and Algerian wars), France continued to maintain intensive political, economic and cultural relations with the newly independent states that emerged in the process of decolonisation. It also intervened militarily, for example in Africa, in order to stabilise the situation, support friendly governments and fight terrorism. It also reconciled with democratic Germany and sought closer cooperation with it, while trying to balance Berlin's influence in Europe in order to prevent German hegemony. It also nurtured its political autonomy in relations with the US, and supported the development of the European security and defence policy (although earlier, in 1954, it had blocked the creation of the European Defence Community).

One feature of France's distinctive policy, especially during the rule of General Charles de Gaulle in the 1960s, was the establishment of pragmatic political and economic relations with the Soviet Union and the countries of the Soviet bloc, which was illustrated in its rhetoric by the slogan 'Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals'. Another period of France's more intense interest in the 'European East' was the thaw in relations between the West and the Soviet Union, and then Russia, after the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s. At that time, France promoted the idea of a new political and security architecture in Europe, which was reflected in the signing of the Charter of Paris for a New Europe (1990) and the Pact on Security and Stability in Europe (1995, based on the so-called Balladur Plan from 1993). Although Paris was unable to keep up with Berlin in the intensity of its relations with the Russian Federation, it nevertheless tried to informally compete with it to a degree in this

area. At the same time, it periodically accepted the Moscow-initiated format of the Russian-German-French triangle summits (meetings in 1998, 2003–2005 and 2010–2011). France has also at times tried to play an active role in attempts to stabilise the situation in the countries of broader Eastern Europe. Since 1992, it has been the co-chair (along with the US and Russia) of the CSCE/OSCE Minsk Group, which was established to lead mediation efforts in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. In 2008, President Nicolas Sarkozy mediated in the Russian-Georgian conflict, and since June 2014 France has participated (e.g. at the presidential level) in the so-called Normandy Group, a political dialogue platform created to settle the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. French military interventions in Afghanistan, the Balkans and Libya, undertaken in coordination with the US, the UK and/or NATO, have at times pitted France against Russia politically, but they have also encouraged dialogue with Moscow (including on such issues as Iraq, Syria, Iran's nuclear problem and the fight against terrorism).

Although Emmanuel Macron, unlike François Fillon or Nicolas Sarkozy, is not part of the establishment of the neo-Gaullist republican party, he has inherited a certain French strategic and intellectual tradition which includes sovereignist traits and Russia-friendly attitudes. He has also assumed both the positive and negative legacies of French-Russian relations.⁴ On the positive side, there has been a rich infrastructure of such relations, including institutions of political dialogue and economic cooperation, with representatives from both sides typically holding annual meetings.

France was Russia's twelfth-biggest trading partner in 2017 (thirteenth in 2020) and one of the country's leading investors (\$15bn in accumulated investment). Energy cooperation has been particularly intensive,

⁴ For more on French political debates about Russia, see B. Kunz, *Beyond 'pro' and 'anti' Putin: Debating Russia Policies in France and Germany*, *Visions franco-allemandes*, No. 28, IFRI, January 2018, www.ifri.org.

Table. The main institutions of French-Russian dialogue

Name of institution	Year of establishment	Chairmanship and participants	Tasks
Intergovernmental Commission on Bilateral Cooperation (ICBC)	1996	chaired by prime ministers; attended by selected ministers	coordination of intergovernmental cooperation
Economic, Financial, Industrial and Trade Council (EFITC)	1992	chaired by ministers of economy; attended by selected deputy ministers	the executive body of the ICBC*; coordination of sectoral dialogue within 13 joint working committees headed by deputy ministers (for information technology, communications and cooperation in the field of digital television and broadcasting; for aircraft construction; for construction, housing and utilities; for outer space; for transport and road infrastructure; for cooperation in the field of innovation; for tourism; for cooperation in the field of intellectual property protection and the fight against counterfeit goods; for energy; for territorial development; for cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy; for agriculture; for investment and modernisation of the economy)

* When the forum was established (1992) it was an independent body, but after the level of bilateral relations was raised (1996) it was formally subordinated to the ICBC.

Table. The main institutions of French-Russian dialogue (cont.)

Name of institution	Year of establishment	Chairmanship and participants	Tasks
Russian-French Cooperation Council on Security Issues (CCSI)	2002	meetings of foreign and defence ministers	dialogue on international issues
Interagency Working Group on New Challenges and Threats (IWGNCT; formerly the Interagency Working Group on Fighting Terrorism)	2004 / 2013	meetings of designated senior officials	a body under the CCSI; dialogue on the fight against terrorism, organised crime and other threats; holds irregular meetings
High Russian-French Interparliamentary Commission (HIC)	1995	chaired by the chairs of the lower houses of parliament; attended by selected deputies	coordination of interparliamentary cooperation
Joint meetings of the foreign affairs, defence and armed forces committees of the French Senate and the foreign affairs committee of the Federation Council of the Russian Federation	2017	chaired by the committee chairs and attended by their members	an instrument for cooperation between committees of the upper houses of parliament; dialogue on international issues, terrorist threats, climate change and other challenges; preparation of joint reports assessing the current situation and policy

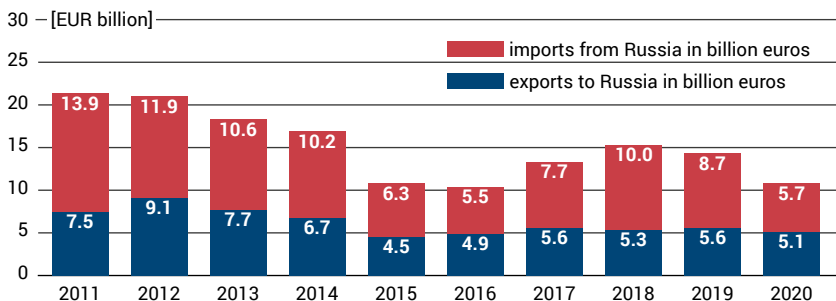
led by Total's investment in Russia's Novatek-owned Yamal LNG project (20% stake, \$6bn invested since 2018). Russia has also been an important market for other French corporations, including automotive (Renault-Nissan), aviation (Dassault), food (Danone), retail (Auchan), industrial (Schneider Electric), and pharmaceutical (Sanofi) companies. Russia's Roskosmos has used the conveniently located French cosmodrome at Kourou in French Guiana to launch commercial satellites (17 Russian Soyuz rockets were launched there from 2011 to May 2017, rising to 24 by the end of 2020). In total, more than 600 companies with French capital have operated in Russia and 40 Russian companies have been active in France (including Russian Railways and Gazprom companies). Russia has supplied a quarter of the uranium fuel needs of French nuclear power plants, and Russian companies have invested a total of about \$3 billion in France. Scientific cooperation and academic exchanges, as well as cultural cooperation at regional and local levels, have also been developing rapidly.⁵

On the negative side, Russian-French trade volume, which peaked in 2011 (€21.4bn according to French data and \$28.1bn according to Russian data), has fallen steadily since 2013, and in 2016 was at its lowest level in years at €10.4 billion according to French data (according to Russian data, it was \$13bn in 2016 while the lowest volume was recorded in 2015 – \$11.6bn). This resulted not only from Russian-EU economic sanctions, in place since 2014, but primarily from a declining value of Russian energy exports to France (due to lower prices). Indeed, exports of crude oil, petroleum products and natural gas – according to French data – accounted for up to 68% of total Russian exports to France in 2016, with other raw materials accounting for a further 11% (in 2019 these figures was 77% and 11% respectively). Over the same period (2011–2016), the value of French exports to Russia (mainly components for aircraft,

⁵ For more on Russian-French cooperation in various areas, see [Embassy of France in Moscow, ru.ambafrance.org](http://ru.ambafrance.org); [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru).

spacecraft and cars, pharmaceuticals and chemicals) fell by €2.6 billion (according to Russian data, the fall was greater at \$4.9bn).⁶

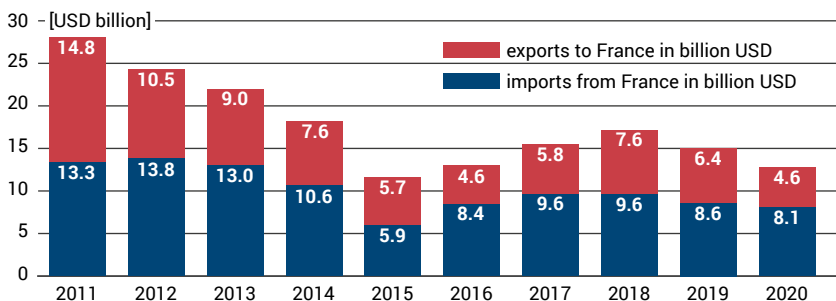
Chart 1. Trade dynamics between France and Russia in 2011–2020 according to French figures*



* French data according to customs statistics, excluding arms trade (which has been covered by the EU embargo against Russia since 2014).

Source: *Données pays selon la nomenclature agrégée: RU - Russie*, The Directorate-General of Customs and Indirect Taxes, lekiosque.finances.gouv.fr.

Chart 2. Trade dynamics between Russia and France in 2011–2020 according to Russian figures



Sources: www.ru-stat.com/database, www.russian-trade.com, per: Federal State Statistics Service, rosstat.gov.ru; Federal Customs Service, www.customs.gouv.ru.

⁶ Trade Representation of the Russian Federation in the French Republic, www.rus-trade.fr, per: Ministry of Finance of the French Republic; portals www.ru-stat.com/database, www.russian-trade.com, per: Federal State Statistics Service, rosstat.gov.ru; 'Foreign trade statistics of France', TrendEconomy, www.trend-economy.com.

The main political problem in Russian-French relations, as in Russia's broader relations with the EU and the West, was the political crisis triggered by its aggression against Ukraine in 2014. France has loyally participated in the EU consensus for an annual extension of political sanctions and limited economic sanctions against Russia, to which Moscow has responded by extending its counter-sanctions, which affect French exports to the country. As a result, the key bodies of the French-Russian dialogue have been left in limbo. The Russian-French Cooperation Council on Security Issues (CCSI) has not met since October 2012, the High Russian-French Interparliamentary Commission (HIC) since February 2013, the Intergovernmental Commission on Bilateral Cooperation (ICBC) since November 2013, and the Interagency Working Group on New Challenges and Threats (IWGNCT) since June 2015. The only body whose activities resumed before Macron took office as president (after a hiatus of more than two years, in January 2016)⁷ was the Economic, Financial, Industrial and Trade Council (EFITC) along with its working groups.

Russia's assertive policies in countries and regions of particular interest to France, such as Syria, Libya and a number of other African countries, have also caused tensions. Massive Russian air strikes on civilian facilities in the Aleppo region in the autumn of 2016 even sparked a genuine crisis in bilateral relations: Russia blocked a French-sponsored draft UN Security Council resolution aimed at halting the bombardments and deploying humanitarian aid in October 2016. President François Hollande called Russian actions a war crime and said Moscow could be sued at the International Criminal Court. President Vladimir Putin, in turn, cancelled a visit to France scheduled for the autumn of 2016 after

⁷ It is worth noting that the Council meeting, which took place on 25 January 2016 in Moscow was chaired on the French side by the then minister of economy, industry and digital technology, one Emmanuel Macron; the Russian side was headed by the then minister of economic development Aleksei Ulukayev, who was arrested nine months later on charges of attempted large-scale corruption and sentenced in December 2017 (in a *de facto* political trial) to eight years' imprisonment in a maximum security labour camp.

Hollande stated that he did not intend to raise any other topic than Syria during their meeting.⁸

3. Macron and the attempts at French-Russian détente

Emmanuel Macron himself was on the receiving end of aggressive Russian hybrid actions when Russian state media and secret services unleashed a hostile propaganda and subversion campaign against him in the first half of 2017 (see further below). Thus it was all the more surprising when he eagerly accepted Vladimir Putin's congratulations (8 May) the day after winning the presidential election, and invited him during their first phone call (18 May) to pay a visit to France, which happened as early as 29 May 2017.

The presidents' high-profile meeting at the Palace of Versailles near Paris and the rhetoric of the French president at the time demonstrated a clear desire to improve France's relations with Russia and engage in strategic dialogue and cooperation.⁹ Macron's actions were three-pronged: to revive the channels of dialogue (especially political dialogue), to deepen and intensify it (especially in the economic sphere and on strategic issues) and give it a European dimension (especially through the involvement of the European Union).

In retrospect, it can be concluded that **Macron's efforts had two active phases. The first one came immediately after he took office as**

⁸ K. Willsher, A. Luhn, 'Vladimir Putin cancels Paris visit amid Syria row', The Guardian, 11 October 2016, www.theguardian.com.

⁹ During their joint press conference, President Macron referred to the 300th anniversary of a visit by Tsar Peter I to France, emphasising the long tradition of French-Russian friendship. He also stressed that "none of the major contemporary problems can be solved without the participation of Russia". According to Macron, the most important topics of the talks were the situation in Syria, the fight against terrorism, Ukraine, bilateral cooperation (including humanitarian dialogue and economic & cultural cooperation projects), and the situation in Russia (including the rights of the LGBT community in Chechnya). 'Meeting with President of France Emmanuel Macron', the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation, 29 May 2017, www.en.kremlin.ru.

President in 2017, and was primarily reflected in the establishment of a new format of dialogue with Russia – the Trianon Dialogue.¹⁰

The Trianon Dialogue

President Macron's first initiative, which was already announced at his first meeting with Putin in Versailles in May 2017, was the Trianon Dialogue. The agreement to launch it was struck in September 2017. Conceived as a dialogue between the civil societies of France and Russia to build mutual understanding and trust, it was intended to evoke associations with the German-Russian Petersburg Dialogue, which had been developed for many years. However, the difference was that no regular meetings between the participating activists were envisaged; in the end it boiled down to the creation of two internet portals (one in Russian and one in French) to promote bilateral cooperation initiatives and projects. The Trianon Dialogue, led by a 30-member Coordinating Council (with 15 representatives each from Russia and France, mainly academics) headed by Professor Anatoly Torkunov, the rector of MGIMO (the Russian Foreign Ministry's university), and Ambassador Pierre Morel, does not provide grants, but only offers advertising and assistance in bringing together partners in cooperation, funded by various state and private institutions from both countries. Support is intended primarily for youth and scientists, entrepreneurs, artists and cultural activists. The dialogue's priority topics were 'the city of the future' (2018), education (2019), and climate & environmental protection (2020). It is clear that the cooperation was designed to foster people-to-people contacts and practical transfers of knowledge and technology.

¹⁰ [Трианонский диалог, www.dialogue-trianon.ru](http://www.dialogue-trianon.ru); 'Trianon Dialogue: Strengthening discussions between French and Russian civil society', the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en; [an interview with Pierre Morel](#), the French Institute, 9 November 2020, www.institutfrancais.com.

In May 2018, President Macron revealed that a roadmap for a dialogue on cybersecurity had been prepared, and announced that confidential information on those matters would be shared with Russia.¹¹

The second phase of France's stepped-up actions towards Russia came in the summer of 2019. Macron made a special gesture by inviting Vladimir Putin to visit his summer residence at Fort de Brégançon on 19 August 2019,¹² just before the G7 summit (the forum of the most developed countries from which Russia was excluded after its aggression against Ukraine in 2014) in Biarritz, France. Earlier, on 24 June, the Prime Ministers of the two countries, Édouard Philippe and Dmitri Medvedev, met in Le Havre, France.¹³

The institutions of dialogue were then revived; this was primarily reflected in the reactivation of meetings between foreign and defence ministers in the 2+2 format (CCSI) in Moscow on 9 September 2019, after a seven-year hiatus.¹⁴ However, this did not mean a full normalisation of relations. For example, there was no resumption of the regular meetings of the intergovernmental bilateral commission at prime ministerial level (ICBC). Despite an agreement in May 2018 to reactivate the inter-parliamentary commission (HIC) as of autumn 2018, the cooperation body still has not been revived, although there have been meetings of the heads of both parliaments. Instead, the initiative has been seized

¹¹ 'Joint news conference with President of France Emmanuel Macron', the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation, 24 May 2018, www.en.kremlin.ru. The first meeting of a bilateral working group on international information security in the area of communication and information technologies only took place in September 2020.

¹² 'Presidents of Russia and France made press statements and answered media questions', the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation, 19 August 2019, www.en.kremlin.ru.

¹³ 'Российско-французские переговоры', the Government of the Russian Federation, 24 June 2019, www.government.ru.

¹⁴ 'Foreign minister Sergey Lavrov's statement and answer to a media question at a news conference following Russian-French ministerial-level talks in the 2+2 format, Moscow, September 9, 2019', the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 9 September 2019, www.mid.ru/en.

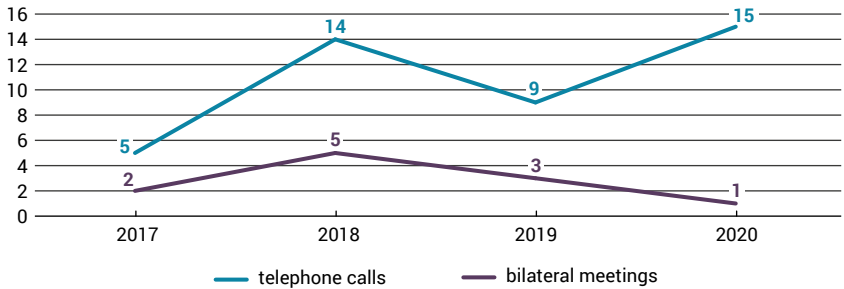
by the French Senate, whose foreign affairs, defence & armed forces committee signed a memorandum on regular dialogue with the foreign affairs committee of the Federation Council (the upper house of the Russian parliament) back in February 2017; they have held annual joint meetings since then, and on two occasions (in 2018 and 2020) produced a report which is a comprehensive assessment of bilateral relations and topics for potential cooperation.¹⁵ On the other hand, the ministerial cooperation council (EFITC) and its working groups have met regularly (on an annual basis).

Contacts have particularly intensified at the level of heads of state. In total, during the three and a half years of Macron's rule, there have been 11 bilateral meetings between them (4 in France, 2 in Russia, 4 at international meetings and 1 videoconference).¹⁶ The leaders have also been in touch (almost exclusively at Macron's initiative) by telephone (43 times by the end of 2020). According to Kremlin statements, the main topics of conversation have included the situation in Syria (27), bilateral relations (20), Ukraine (18), Libya (10), Iran (9), the Karabakh conflict (5) and the situation in Belarus (4). This was consistent with Macron's statements that dialogue with Russia on important and topical international issues and crises is of great importance to him. Meetings and consultations on these key international topics have also taken place at the level of special envoys of presidents and foreign ministries, and on several occasions at the level of heads of foreign ministries.

¹⁵ С. Изотов, А. Халитова, 'Совет Федерации и сенат Франции выходят на стратегический диалог', Известия, 27 February 2017, www.iz.ru; The Federation Council of the Russian Federation - news about France, www.council.gov.ru/events/news/?countries=FR; Доклад «Россия-Франция: за повестку дня, основанную на доверии», the Federation Council of the Russian Federation, 5 April 2018, www.council.gov.ru; Совместный доклад «Россия-Франция: за повестку дня, основанную на доверии», the Senate of the French Republic, 15 June 2020, www.senat.fr.

¹⁶ President Macron's expected participation in the celebrations of the 75th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany (he was one of very few European leaders to accept Putin's invitation), including the military parade in Moscow's Red Square on 9 May 2020, was supposed to be a symbolically important event. However due to the pandemic, the celebrations were first postponed (to 24 June), then scaled down, and the French president did not attend them.

Chart 3. Dynamics of contacts between Macron and Putin



Source: author's own compilation based on data from the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation.

As part of the bilateral strategic dialogue, Ambassador Vimont revealed, in 2019 French proposals were conveyed to Russia in five areas: technological and strategic challenges; bilateral cooperation in the area of security and defence; European cooperation in these fields; humanitarian issues, human rights and the role of women in conflicts and their prevention; regional conflicts.

Another outcome of Macron's presidency has been the deepening of dialogue and cooperation between France and Russia in the field of advanced technologies. These were not new topics in bilateral relations.

French-Russian cooperation in science and technology¹⁷

Scientific and technological cooperation between the two countries has been developing for many years, and now consists of a dense network of joint research projects, laboratories, research centres, etc. funded both by the two sides (especially France, e.g. FrenchLAB and other projects of the CNRS centre) and the EU (the ERA.Net RUS Plus programme to support scientific cooperation with Russia).

¹⁷ For more see 'Partenariats' and 'Innovation', Embassy of the French Republic in Moscow, www.ru.ambafrance.org.

Within its framework, the Russian-French NAUKA INNOV centre, established in 2016 under the auspices of the Russian-French Chamber of Commerce and Industry, supports dialogue in the field of advanced technologies. The priority areas of this cooperation include nanotechnology, energy and environmental technologies, biotechnology, robotics and regional development.

President Macron, who – as a former minister for the economy, industry and digital technologies – espouses the concepts of the knowledge-based economy and the digital economy, has fostered the deepening of French-Russian cooperation in the area of advanced technologies. This was reflected in the first meeting of the Russian-French Council ‘Industry of the Future’ in Moscow in December 2019 (earlier, the first bilateral forum organised under the same banner was held in April). The declared priority areas for joint projects include the Internet of Things (IoT), human-machine interfaces, augmented reality (AR), and innovations in the area of technological chains and supplies. Macron hinted at France’s ambitions in May 2018 when he said that it “would like to participate in the diversification of the Russian economy”.¹⁸

4. Macron and EU policy towards Russia

While developing his country’s bilateral dialogue with Russia, Emmanuel Macron has shown his awareness that some important decisions concerning economic and trade cooperation as well as dialogue on international security require multilateral action, primarily within the European Union. This is consistent with his vision of strengthening the sovereignty and independence of the community and its policies. To this end, he has also tried to enlist the support of EU partners for his concept of restoring dialogue and cooperation with Russia. These ideas have converged with the actions of some European politicians and

¹⁸ ‘Joint news conference with President of France...’, *op. cit.*

officials, including the EU ambassador to Moscow Markus Ederer, who – particularly since 2019 – has been lobbying for an overhaul of the EU’s relations with Russia.¹⁹ This has aligned with criticism of the negative consequences of mutual sanctions by representatives of some governments, such as Italy, Austria, Hungary and Cyprus.

The French president has also taken note of the initiatives put forward since autumn 2019 by the head of the German Foreign Ministry, Heiko Maas, concerning a ‘new EU eastern policy’ which would also include Russia.²⁰ These were related to the German presidency of the European Council in the second half of 2020. It can be presumed that the next phase of France’s stepped-up efforts to improve relations with Russia, which came in the summer of 2019, was closely correlated with this development and reflected a certain informal rivalry between Paris and Berlin, as the latter has so far dominated initiatives on a ‘new EU eastern policy’, including relations with Russia.

France thus undertaken concrete action. Ambassador Jean-Pierre Chevènement, formerly an influential politician and official, had been its Foreign Ministry’s special envoy for the development of economic relations with Russia since 2012. President Macron left him in post while nominating his own ‘special envoy for the architecture of trust and security with Russia’ in September 2019, with Ambassador Pierre Vimont taking up the post in late November 2019. Ambassador Yuri Ushakov, an assistant to the Russian president and Putin’s chief foreign policy adviser, became his formal partner on the Russian side. Enlisting the support of European partners for the French president’s initiatives addressed to Russia became one of Vimont’s major tasks. In January and February 2020, Vimont toured European capitals to explain Macron’s concept (i.e. offering

¹⁹ See ‘EU envoy urges bloc to engage more with Russia over 5G and data’, Financial Times, 13 September 2019, www.ft.com.

²⁰ See ‘Speech by Foreign Minister Heiko Maas at the New Year reception of the German Eastern Business Association (OAOEV)’, Federal Foreign Office, 10 January 2019, www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en.

reassurance that France does not intend to undermine the EU's sanctions regime targeting Russia or question the principles of the EU's policy towards Russia, the so-called five Mogherini points agreed in 2016)²¹ and probe reactions to it. He held talks with ambassadors from EU member states (in the format of the EU's Political and Security Committee) and NATO, and paid visits to Poland, Finland and Lithuania. However, this activity was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic that has swept Europe since March 2020.

Meanwhile, the European Union began a discussion on overhauling its policy towards Russia, launching this process on 5 March 2020 at an informal EU Council meeting (in the Gymnich formula) in Zagreb.²² European Council President Charles Michel planned a debate on German proposals to deepen the EU's 'selective engagement' with Russia for the second half of 2020 (although in the end this did not happen).

However, the atmosphere of bilateral relations was poisoned in the summer of 2020 by Russia itself. The attempted assassination of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny using a *novichok* chemical warfare agent on 20 August caused widespread international repercussions. This act of terrorism by the Russian secret services (the substance used was under strict control of the state security structures), even though it took place on Russian territory, was a violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention. A French laboratory confirmed the results of tests by the German Bundeswehr laboratory which identified the substance used as a chemical weapon, thus giving Russian diplomacy a pretext to attack France as well.

²¹ For the content of the five principles of EU policy towards Russia, see 'EU reaches agreement on guiding principles of its policy towards Russia', EU Neighbours News East, 15 March 2016, www.euneighbours.eu; *The EU's Russia Policy. Five guiding principles*, Briefing, February 2018, European Parliament, www.europarl.europa.eu.

²² See 'Gymnich: Statement by the High Representative following the informal meeting of EU Foreign Ministers', Delegation of the European Union to Turkey, 5 March 2020, www.avrupa.info.tr/en.

In statements issued in September and in an address to the UN General Assembly, President Macron strongly urged Moscow to provide answers on Navalny's poisoning.²³ A joint statement by the foreign ministers of France and Germany in early October struck a similar tone.²⁴ With Moscow uncooperative, Paris supported the new EU sanctions against Russian entities announced in mid-October 2020. Before that, in early September, France cancelled a meeting of the Cooperation Council on Security Issues in the 2+2 format scheduled for 14 September, and Macron postponed his visit to Russia which had been scheduled to take place in the same month.

At the same time, however, during foreign visits in late September 2020 – including to Lithuania and Latvia, countries critical of the Kremlin's policy – Macron reiterated the need for dialogue and cooperation with Russia.²⁵ This showed that despite another cooling of relations with Moscow, he had not abandoned his visions of détente. It was confirmed by Macron's resumption of phone calls with Putin in November and visits by French ministers (of the interior and transport) to Moscow in late 2020.

²³ 'French analysis concludes Navalny was poisoned in attempted assassination – Elysee', Reuters, 15 September 2020, www.reuters.com; 'Emmanuel Macron speaks at UN General Assembly', the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 22 September 2020, www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en.

²⁴ 'Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of France and Germany – Alexei Navalny', the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 7 October 2020, www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en.

²⁵ 'Cooperation with Russia necessary for long lasting peace, Macron says in Vilnius', The Baltic Times, 28 September 2020, www.baltictimes.com.

II. RUSSIA ON MACRON

1. An initial sabotage attempt

Russia has not been entirely indifferent to President Macron's activities. In the first phase, however, it was mainly forced to take action to prevent a potential crisis in bilateral relations related to its attempt to interfere in the spring 2017 French presidential elections which brought Macron to power.

Russia attached great importance to the vote. For the Kremlin, it was a matter of consequence who would become the head of a country that, together with Germany (albeit as its weaker partner in Moscow's eyes), constituted a tandem which effectively decided on key issues concerning the European Union and its policies, especially as Moscow perceived a growing all-round crisis in the community and a political rise of populist and nationalist forces which generally displayed anti-American and pro-Russian attitudes. It was the same in France itself, where the leader of the National Front (NF), Marine Le Pen, known for her pro-Russian views (for example, she recognised the annexation of Crimea as 'not illegal', supported Putin's defence of 'Christian values' and called for the lifting of sanctions against Russia), had her best chance of winning the presidency. Moscow 'reciprocated' with propaganda and financial support (for example, in 2009, a Russian-run Czech bank granted a loan to the NF). Another major candidate in the election was a representative of the left, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who called for France to withdraw from NATO, oppose the US, and pursue a more friendly policy towards Russia.

It seems, however, that the Kremlin was betting on a victory for the pre-election favourite François Fillon, the candidate of the conservative, neo-Gaullist right (the Republicans, formerly the UMP), a former Prime Minister who was also known for his sympathetic views towards Moscow and cooperation with it (for example, he had been a regular guest

at Russia's Valdai Forum and had criticised EU sanctions against Russia). This was a convenient situation for the Kremlin as it could expect a favourable turn in France's post-election foreign policy.

The Russian subversion operation against Macron²⁶

As François Fillon's candidacy weakened, and he then squandered his election chances (from March 2017) as a result of a job scandal involving his wife while the young and energetic liberal candidate Emmanuel Macron was steadily rising in the polls, Moscow faced a challenge. In this situation, Russia resorted to an attempt to replicate (albeit on a considerably smaller scale) the subversion operation it had carried out during the 2016 US presidential election. It consisted of three typical phases. In the first (from February 2017), Russian state-controlled media (including RT and the Sputnik foreign service) launched a negative propaganda campaign, reinforced and radicalised by Russia-based internet trolls and bots. It accused Macron of such things as subservience to the US, mental illnesses, being a 'pervert' or secretly gay. In the second, hackers – later identified by Western internet companies as belonging to groups organised by the Russian military intelligence (GRU) – launched two waves of cyberattacks (in early March and mid-April) on servers used by Macron's campaign, resulting in the theft of emails and documents. In the third phase (two days before the crucial second round of the election, which saw Macron face off against Le Pen), 15 GB of stolen data went online, along with individually forged documents meant to prove alleged financial irregularities in Macron's campaign. Alongside this operation, Moscow had already decided to bolster Le Pen's candidacy politically (or so it thought):

²⁶ For more details, see A. Guiton, '«MacronLeaks»: de nouveaux éléments accréditent la piste russe', *Libération*, 8 December 2019, www.liberation.fr; J.-B. Jeangène Vilmer, *The "Macron Leaks" Operation: A Post-Mortem*, Atlantic Council, June 2019, www.atlanticcouncil.org.

she was received in the Kremlin by President Vladimir Putin on 24 March, an event which was given extensive media coverage.

However, the actions described above did not have the desired effect and Macron won the presidential elections on 7 May 2017. The Kremlin may have been afraid of his reaction, especially as representatives of Macron's staff had publicly accused Russia of running a hostile campaign against him and attempting to interfere in the election.²⁷ It was probably for this reason that Moscow sought to ease tensions by moving quickly to establish positive contact with the new president. This tactic turned out to be the right one, as French government officials did not accuse Russia of being behind the cyberattacks, either then or later (although representatives of the US secret services did do so publicly).

2. Russia's intentions towards Macron: testing the limits

Moscow has welcomed President Macron's efforts to improve bilateral relations, and Putin has repeatedly praised him during their meetings. However, it is difficult to find examples of Russian concessions to Paris in either the political or economic spheres.

To a certain extent, Russia's intentions towards France may have been reflected in the proposals formulated by members of the foreign affairs committee of the Federation Council (the upper house of parliament) and included in a report on bilateral relations and their development which was issued jointly with the foreign affairs, defence and armed forces committee of the French Senate. In accordance with the operating rules of Putin's system of power, the Russian representatives, unlike the French, did not present their own views there, but primarily followed the instructions from the Kremlin and the Russian Foreign Ministry.

²⁷ Macron himself said in Putin's presence in May 2017 that the Russian media – RT and Sputnik – had been acting as “organs of deceitful propaganda”. ‘Joint news conference with President of France...’, *op. cit.*

Russia's proposals as included in the joint report of the foreign affairs committee of the French Senate and Russia's Federation Council²⁸

The European security architecture

The Federation Council proposes to agree on a 'roadmap' for Russian-French dialogue aimed at building a new European security architecture. The first phase (to the end of 2020) would involve identifying the issues on which the two sides have converging positions and agreeing on steps to increase mutual trust. In the second phase (to 2022) Russia and France would exchange declarations (or sign a joint declaration) committing to renounce the use of force as a first resort and to resolve contentious issues in Europe by peaceful means exclusively. These documents would then be made legally binding. The next phase would involve convening a multi-lateral conference in the OSCE format with the aim of adopting a new version of the Helsinki Accords (Helsinki 2.0).

Military security in Europe

Russia's demands are in line with its existing security policy strategy. These include: abandoning NATO's reinforcement of its eastern flank; adopting a moratorium on the deployment of medium-range missiles on the European continent; and supporting the Russian-Chinese draft treaty banning the deployment of weapons in space. The Russian side also proposes a resumption of dialogue on security in space, and a return to reciprocal visits by each side's warships to the ports of Brest, Marseille and Vladivostok.

Interparliamentary dialogue

The Federation Council proposes to create a mechanism for inter-parliamentary dialogue on issues of strategic stability and interna-

²⁸ *Совместный доклад «Россия-Франция: за повестку дня, основанную на доверии»*, the Senate of the French Republic, 15 June 2020, www.senat.fr.

tional security, and to convene an interparliamentary conference with the participation of non-governmental organisations in St. Petersburg for this purpose.

Regional conflicts

On the issue of Ukraine, Russian proposals have been limited to creating an interparliamentary format of the so-called Normandy Group and launching an initiative in the interparliamentary forum to develop measures to prevent the prolongation of the 'Ukrainian internal crisis in connection with problems with the implementation of the Minsk agreements in the established order'. Russia has also signalled its readiness to negotiate the deployment of UN peacekeepers on the line of contact between Ukrainian forces and (Russian-backed) separatists in the Donbas. On the Syrian conflict, it calls for economic and humanitarian assistance to be provided.

Economic cooperation

The section devoted to economic cooperation notes that the Russian side prioritises the lifting of economic sanctions as a factor which has had "an extremely negative impact on the state and development of bilateral ties between the two countries". Moreover, there is a clear interest in shifting the burden of economic cooperation onto the interregional level. In general, the Russian side argues that the issues of economic cooperation and the situation in the areas of security and political relations should not be linked.

Humanitarian cooperation

In the area of humanitarian cooperation, Russia is interested in two issues. Firstly, the use of French-Russian parliamentary contacts for the purposes of politics of memory, for example by promoting its initiative to have the victory of the Soviet Union in World War II and the monuments to the Red Army and the fighters against German Nazism recognised at the UN as part of universal heritage,

and to revise school and university history textbooks in Europe to reflect the 'historical truth' about World War II.

Secondly, the Russian side has shown interest in developing contacts, not between civil societies (as declared by the French side) but rather between political and administrative structures, with particular emphasis on interparliamentary and interregional cooperation (including between cities). It should be noted that the organisation of the latter on the Russian side would be handled by the state agency *Rosstrudnichestvo* (a bureaucratic structure established in 2008 as a tool for controlling and using the Russian diaspora to achieve the Kremlin's foreign policy goals).

Compiled by Witold Rodkiewicz

These proposals indicate that **in the security area**, on the one hand Russia expected France to violate its allied solidarity with NATO and conclude bilateral agreements with Moscow in line with its interests (in the spirit of the principles of indivisible security which it emphasised), while on the other hoping that Paris would where possible push both the EU and NATO to review their policies towards Russia, i.e. to abandon the reinforcement of the Alliance's eastern flank, resume dialogue and military cooperation with Moscow, and support Russian initiatives in the area of arms control and disarmament.

In the area of international issues, Russia expected France to partly support Moscow's political goals, including putting pressure on Kiev to fulfil, in line with Russian interests and perceptions, its commitments on the Donbas under the Minsk agreements (which would open the door to lifting EU sanctions against Russia), and providing unconditional economic aid to Syria (effectively to the Assad regime).

In the area of economic cooperation, Russia expected France to intensify it, and more specifically to take steps to potentially make this

cooperation more resistant to the sanctions imposed by the EU and the US against Russia. It also hoped that efforts would where possible be made to either have France block these sanctions at the EU forum, or reach a collective EU decision to ease and lift them.

In the humanitarian area, Russia expected France (which gladly referred to the traditions of the two countries' alliances in World Wars I and II), for example, to support Russian propaganda on recent history, in opposition to the narrative presented by EU member states from Central and Eastern Europe.

This list should be treated as Russia's 'maximum plan'. Indeed, it is unlikely that Moscow realistically expected Paris, with its strong political and economic ties to other European countries and the US, to be willing and able to go that far in fulfilling its demands. However, it probably expected France to lobby on these issues, which would gradually steer the policy of the EU and its leading member states in a direction favouring Moscow's interests, and in particular heighten tensions in transatlantic relations and undermine US influence in Europe. Russia has thus been putting the limits to which France has been prepared to go under Macron to the test.

3. Russian policy towards Macron's France: training a partner

Russia welcomed the major agreement in May 2018 for France's Total to acquire a 10% stake in the Yamal LNG project (gas production, liquefaction and export project in partnership with Russia's Novatek on the Yamal peninsula) for \$2.5 billion. This project was primarily beneficial for Moscow. Russia made no special exceptions for French producers with regard to the import blockades under the sanctions regime, although some of them avoided sanctions by virtue of having plants on its territory. However Moscow gradually stepped up its demands regarding the localisation of production, which French businessmen

complained about. Yet at the same time the Kremlin was dissatisfied with the curtailed cooperation between French companies and the Russian arms sector due to the EU sanctions.

Russia praised France for its proactive approach to efforts to create international regulations on the principles of information and cyber-security, while also criticising individual elements of the November 2018 initiative by Paris on the issue, mainly for what it considered insufficient guarantees on the protection of state sovereignty and the respect for the principle of non-interference in internal affairs.²⁹ Moscow also expressed its dissatisfaction with France over its lack of support for Russia's 2018 draft UN General Assembly resolution on the declaration of no first placement of weapons in outer space, and also over some parts of the French space defence strategy announced in July 2019.³⁰

President Putin's participation in events taking place in Paris, such as the commemoration of the end of World War I in November 2018, the funeral of former President Jacques Chirac in September 2019, and the summit of the so-called Normandy Format on Ukraine in December 2019, could be considered as friendly political gestures. On international issues, bilateral consultations were held between designated French officials (including the Foreign Ministry's political director on Iran, the president's special envoy on Syria, the envoy on Libya) and the Russian Foreign Ministry, as well as between the directors for international cooperation at their defence ministries.

²⁹ 'Comment by the Information and Press Department of the Russian MFA on Russia's Approach to the French Initiative "Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace"', the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 20 November 2018, www.mid.ru.

³⁰ A statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation of 5 August 2019. In a toned-down form, this criticism was reiterated by Minister Sergei Lavrov at a meeting in the 2+2 format in September 2019. See 'Foreign minister Sergey Lavrov's statement and answer to a media question at a news conference following Russian-French ministerial-level talks in the 2+2 format, Moscow, September 9, 2019', the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 9 September 2019, www.mid.ru/en.

However it has been difficult to find any traces of France influencing Moscow's policy in this area. This has been acknowledged by representatives of the French side, including the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, General François Lecointre, who said in January 2020: "I have proposed that we make the specific case of the Central African Republic a laboratory for probing Russia's goodwill as a partner in solving crises, rather than someone who wants to use these crises for destabilisation. I am waiting to be able to truly gauge the degree of goodwill of our Russian colleagues. At this stage, though, it remains quite difficult to see". Defence Minister Florence Parly, in turn, said in July 2020: "If the question is whether there have already been some tangible results from the dialogue that France has initiated with Russia, I will answer very frankly that not yet, but we realise that this type of dialogue cannot bring immediate effects. We must be able to continue it".³¹

In Syria, Russia has continued to provide its political and military support to the Assad regime and has carried out occasional attacks targeting the civilian population (including a wave of air strikes in Idlib province in autumn 2019). Nor has it prevented the Syrian regime from repeatedly using chemical weapons³² (despite the fact that President Macron referred to this as a 'red line' in May 2017, while emphasising the need for civilians to have access to humanitarian aid). Moscow has also failed to bring about progress in the so-called political process in Syria, and it has managed the situation on the ground (in addition to its unilateral actions) through agreements with Turkey and Iran. It also *de facto* rejected Macron's 2017 initiative to create a new international contact group on Syria. An important thing for Paris, however, was its presence at the quadrilateral summit (with the participation of the leaders of

³¹ L. Lagneau, 'Selon Mme Parly, la relance du dialogue avec la Russie n'a pas encore donné de «résultats tangibles»', Zone Militaire Opex360, 2 July 2020, www.opex-360.com.

³² The Assad regime used chemical weapons at least four times in the first half of 2018 and then again in May 2019. See 'Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012-2020', The Arms Control Association, www.armscontrol.org.

Germany, Russia and Turkey) on Syria in Istanbul in October 2018, but this by no means meant that France was allowed to have a real say in the settlement of the Syrian problem. On the other hand, French interest in Russian proposals to involve European (including French) companies and funds in rebuilding Syria from war damage, as suggested by Ambassador Vimont (although officially the EU and its member states were sceptical about it), fully aligned with Russian political objectives in the country.

In Libya – although Moscow, like Paris, has *de facto* supported the forces of Marshal Khalifa Haftar – Russia has been marginalising France’s influence on the situation by playing (also through the direct military presence of its mercenaries) a game with Turkey, which has supported the legitimate government of Fayeز as-Sarraj. In this case, Paris has openly spoken about the danger of a Russian-Turkish condominium in Libya.³³ As France has found itself increasingly at odds with Turkey, it cannot count on support from Moscow here, as – despite tensions with Ankara – the latter two countries have been developing extensive dialogue and cooperation (including energy and military cooperation). On the issue of Iran, Russia, which supports the French and EU position on preserving the JCPOA agreement, has not taken any steps to circumvent unilateral US sanctions. Paris has also been watching rather helplessly as Russia expands its presence in Africa, a continent of special importance to it, particularly the sub-Saharan area. Russian exploitation of its natural resources, arms sales and support for local authoritarian regimes (usually critical of the West) have in fact been detrimental to France’s vital interests on the continent. This particularly concerns countries such as the Central African Republic, which has seen a growing presence and activity by Russian armed formations from the so-called Wagner group³⁴, as well as expanding economic activity by its protectors from Russia.

³³ See ‘Point de situation extérieure et intérieure sur la Russie – Audition de M. Pierre Lévy, ambassadeur de France en Russie’, the Senate of the French Republic, 3 June 2020, www.senat.fr.

³⁴ See A. Jouve, ‘Russie: quelle stratégie en Afrique subsaharienne?’, RFI, 21 November 2020, www.rfi.fr; A. Barluet, ‘Avec les mercenaires de Wagner, Moscou avance masqué à Bangui’, Le Figaro, 21 December 2020, www.lefigaro.fr.

In Ukraine, Russian-backed separatists have continued to violate the ceasefire regime and restricted OSCE observers' access to the conflict area, while Moscow itself has violated Ukraine's sovereignty, for example by issuing passports to the residents of the occupied part of the Donbas and continuing the integration of occupied Crimea into Russia. Macron, who has publicly declared that solving the 'Ukrainian problem' is a prerequisite for the lifting of sanctions and a full normalisation of relations with Russia, has pinned particular hopes on a change of power in Ukraine (after the victory of Volodymyr Zelensky, perceived as a 'pragmatist', in the presidential elections, followed by his faction's win in the 2019 parliamentary elections). Despite Macron's intense efforts, basically his only, limited success has been to arrange (despite Russia's earlier resistance) another summit of the so-called Normandy Format (Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France), which took place in Paris in December 2019. However, despite minor progress (the announcement of further exchanges of prisoners of war and a local withdrawal of forces), it did not result in a breakthrough, and some of the agreements have not been implemented.³⁵

On Belarus, France, although clearly less active than on Ukraine, has supported the EU's efforts to establish a political dialogue between Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime and civil society in Belarus, which has been protesting since the authorities rigged the presidential elections in August 2020. However Russia has supported the Lukashenka regime and made no effort to force it into a genuine dialogue with its opponents; at the same time, it has accused the West of interference in the country.

The Armenian-Azerbaijani war in Nagorno-Karabakh in autumn 2020, due to France's co-chairmanship of the OSCE Minsk Group (the formal permanent mediator in the conflict) and a politically active Armenian diaspora in France, caused great concern and prompted Paris to engage

³⁵ See K. Nieczydor, 'Gra pozorów. Impas w sprawie wojny w Donbasie' ['A game of appearances. The impasse over the war in Donbass'], *Komentarze OSW*, no. 370, 23 December 2020, www.osw.waw.pl.

in active diplomacy (including President Macron himself, who attempted to mediate in the conflict, but demonstrated overt friendliness towards the Armenians and a highly critical attitude towards Turkey, which supported Azerbaijan). Moscow, however, tolerated the Azerbaijani offensive, and it was only when faced with the threat of the complete elimination of the Armenian presence in Nagorno-Karabakh that it dictated a cease-fire leading to the establishment of a Russian military presence. In doing so, it effectively ignored France's role; this was also a kind of slap in the face for Macron, and a politically troublesome one given the influential Armenian diaspora lobby in France.

Russia has not made it any easier for Macron to achieve a normalisation of relations as it has also continued its aggressive actions in Europe (one of the most spectacular ones was the attempt by Russian military intelligence agents to assassinate Russian expatriate Sergei Skripal and his daughter using a *novichok* chemical warfare agent on the territory of the United Kingdom in March 2018). Russia has also targeted hostile actions directly at France, as evidenced by espionage scandals that have come to light (e.g. an incident involving an attempt to intercept transmissions from a French-Italian satellite by a Russian spy satellite in 2017; the use of French territory as a logistical base by a group of assassins from Russia's GRU military intelligence service between 2014 and 2018; the arrest of a French officer serving in NATO structures on charges of spying for Russia in August 2020³⁶), as well as the confrontational statements towards President Macron and France made by the pro-Kremlin leader of Russia's Chechnya Ramzan Kadyrov after a Chechen expatriate murdered a French teacher in October 2020.³⁷

³⁶ See 'Russia 'tried to spy on France in space' - French minister', BBC, 7 September 2018, www.bbc.com; J. Follorou, 'La Haute-Savoie, camp de base d'espions russes spécialisés dans les assassinats ciblés', *Le Monde*, 4 December 2019, www.lemonde.fr; P. Reltien, F. Cognard, Radio France, 'Espionnage: entre la France et la Russie, des liaisons dangereuses', *France Culture*, 6 November 2020, www.franceculture.fr.

³⁷ 'Chechen leader says Macron stance on cartoons inspires terrorists', Reuters, 27 October 2020, www.reuters.com.

The Philippe Delpal case

Another shadow was cast over Russian-French relations by the arrest in February 2019 of French entrepreneur Philippe Delpal, who worked for the investment fund Baring Vostok, in connection with a legal and financial dispute with a former Russian business partner. Western observers see the case as a typical example of the instrumental use of law enforcement agencies and courts for the private ends of members of the Russian elite. It may also have been a bargaining chip for the Kremlin in its relations with Paris. Intense efforts by the French Foreign Ministry and President Macron himself in Delpal's defence first led to a relaxation of the conditions of his detention (in August 2019, pre-trial detention was converted to house arrest), and in November 2020 to his release, albeit only after he entered into a disadvantageous 'settlement' (effectively an agreement to pay a kind of 'extortion money'). From then on, he participated in the proceedings after being released pending trial (which began in February 2021), but he was still not allowed to leave Russia.³⁸

This attitude from Moscow can be explained by its expectation that President Macron's efforts should translate into real changes in the policy of both France and the EU as a whole towards Russia, even before relations are normalised. In this context, the formula of Russian conditions for a return to partnership with the EU set out publicly (in a February 2020 interview) by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksandr Grushko can also be applied to France and its President's initiatives. Grushko stated that: (1) the EU must concretise its policy towards Russia, shifting away from the so-called 'five Mogherini principles'; (2) NATO must stop trying to implement a policy of containment towards Russia by refraining

³⁸ See 'Russie: l'assignation à résidence du banquier français Philippe Delpal en partie levée', *Le Parisien*, 12 November 2020, www.leparisien.fr.

from increasing its military presence on the eastern flank and returning to cooperation programmes with Moscow; (3) European countries seeking to normalise relations with Russia must make their policies independent of Washington's policy towards Moscow, which includes "revising the approach imposed on them by the US".³⁹

As Ambassador Vimont revealed, in reply to French proposals for areas of strategic dialogue submitted in 2019 (see above), the Russian side presented a five-point plan, but it focused on the area of security and defence. In response to that, the French side decided to reiterate its proposals for dialogue on the Arctic, civil nuclear energy, cooperation in space, human rights, while suggesting that the Russian side was not very interested in them.⁴⁰ This showed that Moscow's intention was in fact to test how far France was potentially prepared to go in breaching allied solidarity within NATO. The exchange of priority topics for dialogue was expected to be followed by the creation of working groups to discuss them. This was supposed to have been the subject of talks between Ambassadors Vimont and Ushakov scheduled for March 2020, but due to the pandemic, the French visit to Moscow did not take place until mid-July 2020, just over a month before the political crisis surrounding Navalny's poisoning erupted. It should therefore be assumed that the process of deepening the strategic dialogue has slowed down as a result.

It appears that the reason for Moscow's rather unceremonious attitude towards Paris, as described above, was typical Russian great-power arrogance, consistent with its strategic culture and perception of its European partners, whom it considered as potentially willing to make

³⁹ Е. Пудовкин, 'МИД назвал три условия для улучшения отношений с Европой', РБК, 16 February 2020, www.rbc.ru.

⁴⁰ 'Russia - Hearing of M. Pierre Vimont, the French President's special envoy for the architecture of security and trust with Russia, before the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Armed Forces Committee', The French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, published by the Embassy of France in the United Kingdom, 19 February 2020, uk.ambafrance.org; 'Audition de M. Pierre Vimont...', *op. cit.*

political concessions. At the same time, however, it stemmed from its growing impatience and disappointment with Macron and his actions.

Russian policy towards France under Macron has therefore been influenced both by his views and attitudes, which Moscow perceives as favourable (advantages); and increasingly over time, by his weaknesses and the features of French policy which it considers as problematic (disadvantages).

4. Macron's advantages from Russia's perspective

Many of President Macron's aforementioned statements on France's and the EU's relations with Russia, and their more detailed elaborations as presented by Ambassador Vimont, must have pleased Moscow. That is because they partly corresponded both with Russia's perception of recent history, including that of Europe, and its current assessment of the global situation, as well as with elements of the Kremlin's narrative and its political interests.

For example, Macron's narrative includes a thesis that the West has pursued a wrong policy towards Russia since the end of the Cold War, essentially driving it out of Europe and pushing NATO's enlargement to the east, which has alarmed Moscow and antagonised Europe. Moreover, this policy – according to Macron – has been a product of pressure from the United States, which has acted against European interests.⁴¹ This assessment, which contradicts historical facts, is almost entirely in line with Moscow's narrative, which seeks to hold the West (and above all the US) responsible for the current profound crisis in mutual relations.

Macron's diagnosis of the present, especially his criticism of the alleged attempts to isolate Russia and 'push it into the arms of China' also aligns with Russian interests. Indeed, it serves to strengthen those in

⁴¹ 'Emmanuel Macron in his own words...', *op. cit.*

the ongoing debate in Western countries who have been advocating a (*de facto* unconditional) normalisation of relations with Moscow in order to prevent it from further deepening its cooperation with Beijing. This unrealistic vision, which ignores the underlying strategic reasons behind the anti-Western Russian-Chinese ‘quasi-alliance’, aids the Kremlin – which acts through friendly experts, among others – as it seeks to convince the EU and the US of the need to ‘pay Russia’ for hazy prospects of loosening its cooperation with China.

Macron’s pessimistic diagnosis of a crisis in the Western community is also partly consistent with the Russian narrative, which, especially in recent years, has been boldly proclaiming the end of the era of Western dominance in international relations and the dawn of a new ‘post-Western’ order.

The resulting call for Europe to develop its self-reliance is in fact politically aimed at the US, from whose domination it should, in Macron’s opinion, free itself; this corresponds to several of Moscow’s strategic goals, which include ousting US influence and presence (especially military) from Europe, driving a wedge between the US and the EU, and weakening (or ideally destroying) NATO. Moscow has for many years emphasised that Europe must break free from the ‘American diktat’, regain its ‘independence’ and develop friendly relations with it. At the same time, Russian politicians, diplomats and experts have expressed disappointment that European declarations on this matter have not been implemented. Moscow has also supported the emerging ideas of building a ‘European army’ (for example, President Putin spoke about this in November 2018).

Macron’s other statements suggesting that Europe should hold discussions with Russia about its geopolitical demands may also be a matter of interest for Moscow. The French president has called for a ‘clarification of mutual misunderstandings’ and has openly asked whether blocking a potential further expansion of Western structures to the

east (including Ukraine) is a Russian demand, implying that he sees no problem in discussing it with Moscow.⁴² The Kremlin may interpret this as France's consent to curtailing the sovereignty of the countries in the region, and therefore as the *de facto* or even formal recognition of the Russian sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and the rest of the post-Soviet area, which is one of Moscow's strategic goals.

The same applies to the issue of arms control. The Russian side appreciated (while at the same time expressing its bitterness about) the fact that France was the only NATO member state to signal its readiness to hold talks on the Russian offer of a mutual moratorium on the deployment of intermediate-range missiles in Europe, which was made in September 2019.⁴³ This was linked to the expiry in August 2019 of the Russian-US treaty on the elimination of their intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles (INF), following its termination in February 2019 by the US in response to Moscow's violations. This happened despite NATO's *de facto* rejection of Russian proposals, which would in practice

⁴² "Since it is in our interest to settle frozen conflicts, perhaps with a broader agenda than just the Ukrainian issue, we look at all the frozen conflicts in the region and clarify our positions. What guarantees does he [Putin] need? Is it actually about the EU and NATO guaranteeing that they will not expand into a particular territory? That is what it's about. I mean: what are their main concerns? What are ours? How can we approach them together? What issues can we work on together?". 'Emmanuel Macron in his own words...', *op. cit.* Ambassador Vimont has spoken in a similar vein, albeit a little more mildly: "The root of the problem is obviously the Russian demand for a sphere of influence and thus a kind of Yalta 2.0, which is indeed totally unacceptable. However, I would like to stress that we are all thinking in a completely static way. [...] We deliberate and we have this debate between Europeans and allies all the time, basically every time we ask ourselves about Ukraine, about Georgia: should we go ahead with their requests for membership in the European Union, NATO? [...] We get immediately divided because there are those who say: 'of course', and we know very well that Moscow won't like it; and that's why we have to move in that direction, because you have to move forward; and on the other side there are the timid, the cautious and the pragmatists who rightly say that we shouldn't cause irritation and therefore it's better to wait for better days". S. Bélaïch, '*20 ans après Poutine: une conversation entre Vimont, Tenzer, Ackerman*', Le Grand Continent, 7 May 2020, www.legrandcontinent.eu.

⁴³ See '*Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to questions during the meeting with members of the Association of European Businesses in Russia, Moscow, October 5, 2020*', the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 5 October 2020, www.mid.ru.

have served to perpetuate the existing asymmetry of missile capabilities in Europe in Russia's favour.

The list of priorities for dialogue and cooperation with Moscow formulated by Macron is also certain to please the Kremlin. This is because recognising Russia's important role in resolving regional and local conflicts logically imposes the need to seek a 'compromise' by taking Russian interests and demands into account. Moreover, mentioning cooperation in the field of digital technologies (or other advanced technologies) in this list fully corresponds to Moscow's priorities including the transfer of cutting-edge solutions to improve and modernise the Russian economy, which is increasingly falling behind the global leaders. Moreover, cooperation in such sensitive areas as digital security, artificial intelligence, quantum computers, biotechnology and genetic engineering may lead to Russia acquiring capabilities it could use against Western states, thus threatening their security. Furthermore, the transfer of some potentially dual-use technologies may either require the lifting of some sanctions against Russia, or lead to attempts to circumvent them.

5. Macron's disadvantages from Russia's perspective

From the Kremlin's point of view, Macron's numerous positive statements towards Russia have only translated into concrete actions by Paris to a limited extent, especially in the EU and NATO forums. In particular, France under his rule has not breached allied solidarity within the EU (and NATO), regularly endorsing the consensus to extend the sanctions against Russia introduced every six months since 2014; Paris has not even made any explicit efforts to curtail them. At the same time, Macron has declared that any easing of sanctions would be formally conditional on the fulfilment of the Minsk agreements with regard to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Moscow clearly hoped that France would put pressure on Ukraine to comply with the agreements in line with Moscow's interests, but even if such pressure has been applied by France, it has so far proved ineffective.

Moreover, France has backed the imposition of further sanctions against Russia under newly created regimes: the EU sanctions mechanism for violations of the Chemical Weapons Convention (October 2018, applied to Russian entities in January 2019), for cyber-attacks (July 2019, applied to Russian entities in July 2020), and against individuals and entities violating human rights (December 2020, applied to Russian officials among others in March 2021). Moscow also criticised the International Partnership against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons initiated by France back in January 2018 (in response to repeated chemical attacks by the Assad regime in Syria) for its alleged ‘unilateralism’ and lack of legitimacy under international law.⁴⁴

Moscow has also complained that French banks are reluctant to finance Russian-French economic cooperation projects, fearing violations of US and EU sanctions against Russia. For this reason, it was announced at another meeting of the Economic, Financial, Industrial and Trade Council (CEFIC) in December 2019 that new mechanisms for joint financing of such projects would be prepared within six months, which would help circumvent the sanctions risk.⁴⁵ Moreover, as mentioned before, the institutions of dialogue between France and Russia have not been fully revived, which from Moscow’s point of view has called Paris’s real intentions into question.

Some of Macron’s statements certainly have not been to Moscow’s liking, either. In his keynote texts, he has listed Russia among the non-Western and authoritarian states pursuing assertive policies that harm the West, Europe and France on many fronts and issues. He has also pointed to Russia’s weaknesses, particularly its economic ones, and its gradually

⁴⁴ For more details, see ‘The International Partnership against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons’, www.noimpunitychemicalweapons.org. Minister Lavrov did that, for example, while also criticising France’s use of the initiative to put pressure on Russia over the Navalny assassination attempt. See ‘Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to questions...’, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ See ‘Россия и Франция запустят механизм совместного финансирования проектов’, РИА Новости, 10 December 2019, www.ria.ru. There is no information on whether these plans have been implemented.

increasing dependence on China, as well as its ability to exploit the relative weakness of Western countries, and especially to fill a security vacuum when these countries disengage from key regions. Macron has made no secret of his concern at Russia's growing activity and presence in Africa, a continent of particular importance to French politics. In his view, it has therefore not only been a partner, but also a challenge for France and Europe. Moscow has also been irked by French criticism of violations of democratic standards, including Macron speaking out publicly about the crackdown on artists (such as the filmmaker Oleg Sentsov) and Russian activists, or for example calling Moscow to account after the aforementioned attack on Navalny.⁴⁶ The Kremlin has been similarly irritated by the disclosure of some details of Macron's talks with Putin by the French media (the Russian president's 'explanations' on the Navalny case, and a reported request for support in the production of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine in early November 2020). Moscow saw these as deliberate leaks by the French side intended to cast Russia in an unfavourable light.

Moscow's impatience has also clearly been growing over the failure to translate French statements on a "new architecture of trust and security" in Europe into concrete political initiatives.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ On the last issue, we can even speak of a rhetorically aggressive reaction from Moscow. In particular, in response to a joint statement on Navalny by the French and German foreign ministers, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova warned Paris and Berlin, saying: "By all appearances, France and Germany are now heading the anti-Russian coalition that is taking shape in the European Union, contrary to the earlier statements by Paris and Berlin on their commitment to partnership with Russia. For our part, we reaffirm that if our colleagues are willing to revise this course towards confrontation and give up their attempts to dictate to us, it is still possible to normalise our dialogue. If they are not willing to do this, we will draw our own conclusions. At any rate, we do not consider it possible to conduct 'business as usual' with Berlin and Paris". 'Comment by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova on the joint statement by the French and German foreign ministers on the situation with Alexey Navalny', the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 7 October 2020, www.mid.ru. Minister Lavrov himself also made critical comments. See 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to questions...', *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ As Lavrov said in a June 2020 article, for example: "We welcome the initiative by President Emmanuel Macron to create a system of European security which would

Consequently, negative assessments of Macron as a phony politician who acts mainly for the sake of appearances and only pretends to seek détente in relations with Russia, which have occasionally been made in the Russian state media and by some pro-Kremlin commentators, have over time started to appear in public statements by officials in Moscow. For example, during the escalation of the Karabakh conflict in autumn 2020, Minister Lavrov accused the French authorities and its president personally of pursuing a policy of empty gestures for domestic purposes: “Wounded pride is clearly showing in my contacts with my US and French colleagues over the past few days, as well as in contacts between President Macron and President Putin on Nagorno-Karabakh, which is sad. (...) Unfortunately, politics is often about the desire to ‘shine’ or to show some kind of quick initiative, to hit the domestic political jackpot, to reinforce positions in multilateral organisations like the EU, to confirm leadership, etc. This is sad”.⁴⁸

The French side has also been aware of Russia’s less than positive intentions in its approach to Macron’s initiatives. As Ambassador Vimont rightly concluded, Moscow was interested in them because it saw them as a way to divide Europe, to exploit contradictions. The second reason, he said, has been its desire to monitor and better understand policies and discussions within the EU, including those on Africa, in which France plays an important role.⁴⁹

not be designed to counterbalance Russia but would be built with our participation. At the end of the day, what actually counts is to move from the right words to making practical steps to reshape the political mindset based on the principles of international law and collective leadership”. ‘Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s article for *La Revue Politique et Parlementaire* (France) on the occasion of Charles de Gaulle’s 130th anniversary, published on June 13, 2020’, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 13 June 2020, www.mid.ru.

⁴⁸ ‘Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov takes questions from RT news channel, Moscow, November 19, 2020’, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 19 November 2020, www.mid.ru/en.

⁴⁹ ‘Audition de M. Pierre Vimont...’, *op. cit.*

SUMMARY

Emmanuel Macron came to power in France calling for a fundamental reconstruction of Europe and its politics. An important part of this concept was the will to normalise relations with Russia, and engage in strategic dialogue and cooperation with it in selected key areas.

He has made efforts to rebuild trust in relations with Russia and with its leader Vladimir Putin personally by intensifying French-Russian bilateral contacts. However, after three and a half years in power, he has not managed to achieve a positive breakthrough, either in bilateral relations or (and even less so) in relations between the European Union and Russia.

This has largely been due to the arrogant and aggressive attitude of Moscow, which has never intended to make any political, economic or security concessions in order to achieve normalisation. In the face of Macron's initiatives, it has adopted a rather passive and reactive stance, waiting for French proposals to become more specific, and above all, to see their potential impact on the West's policy. But the lack of consensus on this issue within the EU and NATO, as well as the attitude of the US and other major Western countries, have been a constraining factor here. At the same time, however, Moscow has hoped that it will provide an opportunity to take advantage of the differences between the US and EU's positions, and also within the EU.

Although we can probably speak of mutual disappointment on the part of the Russian and French authorities, President Macron does not appear to have completely abandoned the idea of *détente* in relations with Moscow. That is because it is firmly anchored in his diagnosis of the international situation and his concept of how to change it. Moreover, the more Russia harms Western, European and French interests, the stronger will probably be the desire of Paris to achieve a *modus vivendi* with Moscow.

However, the prospects for such developments largely depend on factors outside the French president's control. These include both the domestic situation and foreign policy of Russia, the attitude of China, and US policy under the new administration of Joe Biden (here, Macron may on the one hand see some challenges that will make it difficult to pursue his calls for greater independence from the US; but on the other, potential hopes related to a possible opening of dialogue with Russia, including in the area of security). Developments in the EU (the prospects for overcoming internal crises and the fate of efforts to develop capabilities in the area of security and defence, or to coordinate external policy), in its external environment (including the Middle East, North Africa and Eastern Europe), and – last but not least – in France itself (where Macron faces such challenges as social conflicts and economic problems), will also have a significant impact.

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