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The French Presidency of Council of the EU

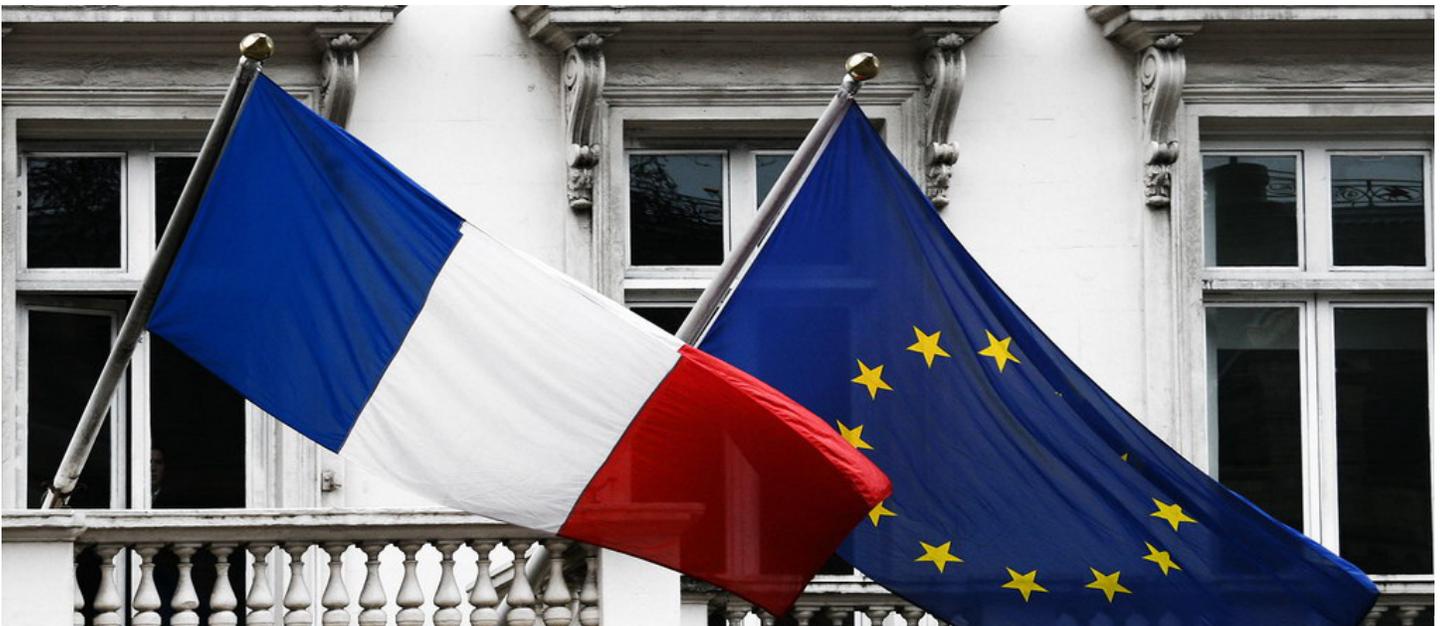
Turning Europe Sovereign

In January 2022, France – one of the founding member states of the EU – embarked on 6-months long journey for the second time since the Lisbon Treaty adoption, and the 13th time in total. French Presidency comes at a time of a power vacuum in the EU, particularly after the UK had left the EU and in the aftermath of the retirement of the long-serving German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Moreover, the Ukrainian-Russian border is facing increasing tensions, while the Conference on the Future of Europe (CotFoE) is expected to end with concrete results. As Europe is faced with times of change, expectations are high from France that it will take the lead and steer the Union in the right direction in the upcoming six months. Having in mind the Presidency slogan - Recovery (*relance*), Power (*puissance*), and Belonging (*appurtenance*) – this Insight analyses how France will navigate Europe in this increasingly complex context.

Towards a More Sovereign Europe through Deeper Integration

The idea of *a more sovereign Europe* has been highlighted as a top priority by the French, while being based on the reforms of Schengen, the establishment of the EU Strategic Compass – a global diplomatic doctrine - and strengthening the relations with EU's neighbours. The level of importance of this idea for the French is best seen in the fact that it has become an overarching priority for its Presidency. In fact, other priorities such as “a greener Europe”, “a more digital Europe”, “a more social Europe”, and “a more humane Europe” are seen from the perspective of power, as elements that are necessary to ensure Europe that can finally take its fate into its hands.

The [announcement](#) of a powerful and sovereign Europe points towards an intention to introduce significant changes within the EU under the French baton. In line with the proclaimed goal, France plans to use its term in the Presidency to launch the reform of the Schengen Area. To that extent, it is willing to spearhead the creation of a border emergency support mechanism that would prevent crises such as the [migration crisis](#) in 2015 and hybrid threats on EU's external borders like one on the [Polish-Belarus border](#). Moreover, introducing political steering of the Schengen Area is another proposal coming from France with



the aim to establish a political architecture with regular meetings of interior ministers, as is the case in the eurozone – the [Schengen Council](#). If taken into consideration that crises such as migration, hybrid threats, and the COVID-19 pandemic have exposed how vulnerable many EU member states are under the current (unreformed) Schengen system, it is likely that they will be inclined to consider supporting the Schengen governance revision.

In order for the Schengen Council to function it is important that the EU develops a more coherent defence and security policy which has been announced through the Strategic Compass. Moreover, issues concerning migration and security demand a united response by the EU as they are deeply interconnected, and new migration waves from Africa as well as from the Middle East are [expected](#). President Macron [anticipated](#) that the EU needs to act proactively and reform the Schengen Area in a move that strengthens the EU's capacities to act. In the case France succeeds in implementing the Schengen reform, it would raise the level of security in the EU and contribute to France's leadership scorecard.

The question of sovereignty has become notable in recent years but in the coming period, it will become a major focus judging by France's priorities. If taken into consideration that after BREXIT France remains the only nuclear power in the EU, thereunto NATO-sceptic, prioritisation of strengthening the EU's defence, security, and sovereignty is likely. On the other hand, Germany remains an important partner in leading the EU. Having in mind its traditional reluctance towards sovereign EU, as well as its pro-NATO stance that considers this military alliance as the pillar of European defence, it will be very difficult for France to persuade the new Chancellor in supporting these major revisions within the EU. However, France might position itself as an intermediary between the south and north of Europe and use this role to gain affection from Germany.

Relationship with its neighbours is the best way for the EU to project power and support stability and prosperity. France knows this and that is why it has recognised Africa as one of the two most important geographical regions for the EU in terms of cooperation. The French administration decided to fuel the engine of cooperation by acting proactively and scheduling a [summit](#) between the European Union and the African Union for February 2022. This was intended to be an important milestone in terms of their contemporary relationship, particularly as the summits between the two continents have seized to take place after 2017. In order to go beyond mere words, France has also put on the EU's agenda the idea of introducing an economic and financial [New Deal](#) for Africa. Considering that Africa is an economically impoverished continent in which other external actors are increasing their foothold, the idea is to place stronger geopolitical prioritisation on Africa that is supposed to outlive France's presidency.

One of the key elements of a more sovereign Europe is an improvement of common defence policy. France is a central member state of the EU, both geographically and politically, and as such, it is natural to expect it to lead reforms in this segment. In fact, France's push for developing Europe's defence policy

goes hand-in-hand with the High Representative's, Josep Borell, warning of the danger of decreasing the EU's influence globally due to "[strategic shrinkage](#)". Progress in the EU's defence policy, during the French Presidency, will be best reflected in finalising work on the EU's [Strategic Compass](#) as an ambitious plan of action for strengthening the EU's security and defence policy. The question of common defence policy was classic collective action problem: everyone agrees that closer integration of European defence efforts and resources is essential, but everyone wants someone else to go first. This time France has taken the helm and would initiate wider European defence cooperation, thus proving its leadership aspirations.

Strengthening the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) as a presidential priority of France fits naturally in the sovereign and powerful Europe concept. In that context, the Strategic Compass represents [a turning point](#) for the EU as a security provider and an important step for European defence policy. It is intended as a roadmap with the action plan for establishing a strong EU rapid deployment capacity of up to 5,000 troops and as a diplomatic compass as its name suggests. As such, it is a significant upgrade from past EU strategy papers as it increases the EU's role as a security provider and in building collective resilience (hybrid threats, disinformation, and cyberattacks).

Full implementation of the Strategic Compass cannot be achieved before 2025 however, as it is worth recalling that the EU Battlegroups approved in 2004 have never once been deployed. Additionally, the question of the EU's institutional crisis management framework – the Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) - remains open as it failed gravely in predicting events in Afghanistan in 2021. As the developments show, the era of [the multipolar world](#) has come and the necessity of timely adjusting becomes increasingly important. Therefore, the fact that France is advocating for a sovereign EU at this moment showcases that the Compass leads to a recategorization of priorities in order to bring back the EU on a geopolitical world map.

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Increasing security for European citizens is yet another element of a powerful Europe as France sees it. For this reason, the French administration has marked the strengthening of police cooperation across Europe as one of its [Programme](#) priorities. The way forward for achieving this goal France sees in the revision of the Europol Regulation in order to make stronger police cooperation under the Europol framework. This priority is interconnected with the Schengen reform, as France plans to spearhead the creation of an intergovernmental [rapid reaction force](#) under the auspices of [Frontex](#). The Council will need to reach an agreement with the European Parliament on this matter, but the Presidency under the French chair is committed to bringing forward institutional dialogue. While defence and security are common interests, by strongly prioritising them, France has proved that it is ready to tackle Europe's most acute problems.

Economic recovery and empowerment is another important factor for a powerful and sovereign Europe. France will continue the implementation of the NextGen Recovery Fund as a means towards the full recovery after the shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, France aspires to go a step further as it recognised the new reality and that the time of austerity measures had passed. French plan presented as a "new European growth model" with the aim to redefine the shared vision for Europe in 2030 enlists reforms in several key areas. By placing [focus](#) on production, innovation and job creation, followed by the reconciliation of economic development with climate ambitions, all the while upholding the European social model, the French endeavour suggests the review of the EU's overall economic governance framework, fiscal rules, and macroeconomic imbalances procedure. Reforms are [reflected](#) in financing future growth through raising public debt and reforming the Stability and Growth Pact. As the proposal is bold in terms of its overall re-envisioning of the EU's growth model it will require an extraordinary activity of France in order to acquire the support of other member states.

Conference on the Future of Europe: Concluding the Debates

The French representative will assume the position in the [Joint Presidency](#) of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CotFoE), which is supported by the [Executive Board](#) in organising the Conference. As the Conference is scheduled to end in May, France will be in charge of organising concluding plenary sessions and facilitating adoption of the Conference Final Report. As multitude of proposals has been presented on citizens' panels, there will be a lot of responsibility on the final plenary session as well as on the Executive Board to filter and include the best of them in the Final Report and present it to the Joint Presidency. The outcome of the Conference will take into account conclusions from the citizens' panels and plenary sessions, as experts, academics, political leaders and civil society organisations are impatiently waiting results of more than a year long discussions. Considering that France is not shying away from adding to the equation the potential [revision](#) of founding treaties, the end results of the Conference become ever more significant.

A lot of proposals have been presented during the CotFoE. Some of them are already envisioned in the treaties while others very bold and their implementation require treaty revisions. Introduction of the Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in EU foreign policy is an initiative that has been circling around for a long time. This proposal has been put forward in the course of the CotFoE and its implementation could make EU decision-making process much smoother. Decreasing the [number](#) of Commissioners to make the European Commission more efficient, while making sure each region is represented, is another proposal with the potential to gain support and find its place in the Final Report. What gives these two proposals particular relevance, is the fact they are implementable without treaty change.

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However, there are issues that are likely to witness resistance by member states and/or some EU institutions as they would require treaty changes. Bolder proposals such as formal [institutionalisation](#) of the "Spitzenkandidaten" system and [introduction](#) the right of legislative initiative are ways to increase the role of the European Parliament. Moreover, the proposals go as far to abolish the rotating presidency of the Council and [renaming](#) this institution as the Senate of the EU that would be chaired by a single person like in regular federations. According to the proposals arrived, it is evident that the Joint Presidency will have a very difficult task in the upcoming months. Nonetheless, as president Macron announced in his famous [Sorbonne speech](#), "the democratic conventions [...] will be an integral part of Europe's radical reform". The Conference on the Future of Europe represents a very good opportunity to start with reforms.

Widening: Can France Steer It in a New Direction?

The policy of enlargement has not always been prioritised depending on which member state is presiding over the Council at the given moment. Having in mind that French agenda is packed with many priorities and bold initiatives, making space for the Western Balkans is encouraging for this region. However, this fact should not be surprising having in mind renewed French [interest](#) for this region, especially after 2019 and the adoption of the [Strategy for the Western Balkans](#). That prioritisation of the Western Balkans is not just a dead letter speaks the fact that President Macron has announced the [EU-WB Conference](#) for June 2022, calling the WB region “a heart of Europe”. The fact that Germany, which presided the Council in the last trio, did not have a similar event showcases that the importance of WB has increased for the leading EU member states.

After the impasse in the enlargement policy was only partly broken by organising two Intergovernmental Conferences with Montenegro and Serbia in December 2021, not all problems in the Western Balkans have been addressed. Blockade of North Macedonia and Albania is first big dispute that France will try to facilitate and overcome. Bosnia and Herzegovina is in the middle of the [biggest political crisis](#) since the war ended, thus not able to progress in its path towards the EU, while Kosovo is failing to reach any agreement with Serbia lately which consequently reflects on its stagnating integration process. After the enlargement methodology has been revised through French initiative, France will now have an opportunity to utilise its diplomatic power to help Western Balkan states make progress in untangling all outstanding disputes, continue internal reforms and accelerate accession process. Although taking care of these tasks is not going to be easy, the fact France is taking charge is rightfully rising expectations among Western Balkans countries.

In order to accelerate integration of the WB region, France needs to reassess EU's enlargement policy and be willing to accept innovative solutions. One such solution is already available, that is a model of [staged accession](#), as it offers added value for the cur-

rent enlargement policy as a good meeting point between the Western Balkans' needs and EU member states' concerns. In fact, the model foresees introducing gradual economic and institutional incentives for those countries that meet stringent conditions during pre-accession stages, while dispensing with the legitimate fears of many in the EU by temporarily limiting the veto rights of future new member states. As France has clearly shown interest in taking the leading position within the EU, putting the mentioned model at the agenda would indeed help the WB to speed up integration and on the other hand help France to consolidate its position as one of the key stakeholders in EU's enlargement policy and as WB's key partner in the EU.

All things considered, it becomes clear that France has presented a very ambitious and visionary presidency programme. Its prioritisation of sovereignty and power for Europe is a trademark throughout its programme, and the focus on enlargement can be seen from this perspective as well. Critical improvements in defence, security and foreign policies have the aim to position the EU on a geopolitical map of a multipolar world. This could be achieved only if Europe maintains economic growth and start necessary internal reforms that the French will have the chance to launch and oversee. If France succeeds in implementing only some of analysed priorities, it has the chance to be remembered as an initiator of critical reforms within the EU, as well as a country that has put an end to enlargement impasse.

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