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Chair of Russia and the International Order: History and Challenges

Beyond the Myth: Realpolitik and the Transformation of Franco-Russian Relations up to the Ukraine War

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*À ma soeur Clémence,
Et au cadeau qu'est l'espérance de te retrouver.*

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“I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma: but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interests.”

Winston Churchill, 1939

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INTRODUCTION

In 1882, the French author Ernest Renan offered a definition of the complex notion of nation, which he grounded in a dual temporal dimension. On the one hand, the nation is a “soul” that refers to a common past, shared memories and traditions that form a collective heritage. On the other hand, it is a “spiritual principle”, evoking the present and the desire to form a political and sovereign community, that embraces this heritage. These two temporal aspects legitimise the existence of the nation and shape its future by continually keeping the past alive.¹

Many debates have taken place over whether the concept of nation should be applied to France or to Russia, given their respective shared histories, which may seem evident but was not necessarily obvious at the time of forming a sovereign political community. In any case, assuming that these states can be considered as nations today, their differences are striking. Although Ernest Renan emphasised that geography, dynasties, ethnic groups, languages, and religions do not, by themselves, define a nation, he acknowledged that they all contribute to its overall identity. In this regard, these components are significantly different between France and Russia, if not absolutely antagonistic. On the one hand, France progressively became largely unified and relatively homogeneous, characterised by its ethnic, linguistic, and religious uniformity. In addition, the French Revolution played a crucial role in shaping the country as a modern nation.² By contrast, Russia has had to reinvent itself repeatedly, reformulating its national identity multiple times through a powerful state structure, in which the plurality of ethnic groups, languages, and religions has always been a defining characteristic. Furthermore, while France is a relatively large European country, Russia has constituted the largest state in the world since the 17th century, and today 25 times larger. It spans two continents with the city of Kyzyl - South-East Siberia - marking the geographical centre of Asia, as well as thirteen seas, two oceans, and eight time zones. Russia also borders sixteen countries, from Norway to North Korea, whereas the French territory shares its frontiers with only eight foreign states, two of which are micro-principalities, i.e., Andorra and Monaco.³

¹ Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-Ce Qu'une Nation?*, (Mille et Une Nuits, 1882).

² *Ibidem*.

³ Alfred Rambaud, “Ethnographie de La Russie,” in *Histoire de La Russie: Depuis Les Origines Jusqu'à l'Année 187*, (Gallica, 1878), 1–31.

These very different realities have influenced not only the way in which France and Russia became modern nations, but also their modes of interaction with the outside world. As two major states, they have shared diplomatic relations dating back over 300 years. This centuries-old relationship has not been constant: it experienced interruptions - sometimes prolonged ones - that have given rise to many opportunities between the two nations, but has often resulted in misunderstandings, betrayals and “missed encounters”, to borrow the expression of the great historian of Russia and member of the Académie Française, Hélène Carrère d’Encausse. ⁴

As early as 1937, the French author Emmanuel Berl succinctly captured this illusion, which he explained through the fundamental difference between the two countries and the impact it has on their relations: “*France, so splendidly defined by geography and history and so evidently a kingdom, struggles to comprehend that Russia, being an empire for which the notion of borders remains abstract and confused, harbors ambitions - sometimes appeased and sometimes exasperated - that are never fully satisfied, never irreducible, and may focus on widely varying objectives*”. ⁵

Despite these differences, numerous historical ties - particularly through cultural, artistic and literary exchanges - have fuelled the notion of a “privileged relationship” between France and Russia, giving rise over the centuries to the myth of two friendly nations - in the Greek sense of *mythos* - evoking the power of “narrative”.⁶ This narrative refers thus in this case to the positive dynamic that the French and Russian communities have built up over time, and that has been forged by certain “authors” from these two countries . If the myth exists, it is only because these authors - represented by the intellectuals and leaders - have succeeded in establishing it as a truth within the community, thereby shaping political decisions. The thesis aims therefore to explore the impact of this myth on Franco-Russian history and, in particular, how it drives the foreign policy of the two countries. It will also examine how it has affected certain decisions, and the role France and Russia have played in its construction, significantly influencing diplomacy, which has often drawn upon this myth.

⁴ Hélène Carrère d’Encausse, “La Russie et La France : Quatre Siècles de Rendez-Vous Manqués,” *Canal Académies*, (L’Institut de France, February 25, 2020).

⁵ Emmanuel Berl, “Le Fameux Rouleau Compresseur ”, (*Gallica*, 1937), 60.

⁶ Pascal Ory, “Qu’est-Ce Qu’une Nation?” *Le Cours de l’Histoire*, (France Culture, November 20, 2020).

Since the power of this narrative has impacted their diplomatic history, reconstructing its key moments chronologically provides insight into the connection between the myth of “privileged relations” and the foreign policy strategies implemented by France and Russia. Serving as a common thread, the narrative has often prevailed within the political elites of both countries, guiding their approach towards one another, even during times of tension. Focusing primarily on contemporary periods, this thesis examines the moments when the myth played a predominant role in shaping foreign policy decisions. Until very recently, both French and Russian diplomacy - or at least a large part of it - were heavily influenced by the narrative of the “privileged relationship”, incorporating it into their decision-making processes. The work also assesses the dynamics of the relationship within the European context, drawing on various confrontations and press coverage. For instance, a comparative perspective is drawn with the German-Russian relationship. Moreover, by examining the historical process and national interest objectives, the research attempts to identify the impact of this narrative on political decisions and foreign policy choices. In the cases of France and Russia, the work will demonstrate that such a process has allowed different interpretations of their relationship and strategic approaches, often leading to either diplomatic success or failure.

Central to this investigation are therefore several key questions that guide the analysis. First, what makes Franco-Russian relations “privileged” within the broader European context, and what are the defining features that distinguish this relationship? Second, how has the narrative of a “special relationship” influenced the development of diplomatic ties, shaping interpretations and initiatives on both sides? Finally, what does the deconstruction of this myth reveal about the current geopolitical situation?

To answer these questions and conduct this in-depth study of the myth surrounding Franco-Russian relations, the thesis bases its reasoning on four main sections. The first chapter seeks to analyse the various factors that have contributed to the construction of the narrative of a “special bond” between the two countries. The following phase consists of the deconstruction of the myth, aiming to demonstrate that the reality of this relationship is much more intricate. This process helps to clarify the ambiguous nature of bilateral interactions between France and Russia, tracing their chronological development up to the recent shift in the current geopolitical landscape. Thus, the second and the third chapters examine French and Russian foreign policies, highlighting their respective roles in the deconstruction of the myth in order to explain its influence on political interpretations in both countries. The narrative and deconstructive

components are illustrated through concrete examples of diplomatic initiatives and grounded in concepts that support a discourse analysis model, which is developed in the following methodological framework. Ultimately, the fourth and final chapter completes the analysis by adopting an experimental perspective, integrating the viewpoints of foreign policy makers. In fact, two Ambassadors from each country were interviewed, providing a dynamic and contemporary reflection on Franco-Russian relations. Given their direct involvement in shaping national foreign policy, the interviewees contribute to the analytical framework, offering valuable insights into the diplomatic influences, their evolutions, and their consequences.

This work therefore contributes to a nuanced understanding of the interplay between historical narratives and foreign policy strategies, shedding light on the evolution and contemporary realities of Franco-Russian interactions. While their bilateral relations have been widely studied, the perception of an exclusive and privileged bond between the two countries has remained largely intact until recently. The persistent influence of this narrative is reflected in the very gradual deterioration of diplomatic ties over the past two decades. However, the recent shift in 2022/23 - triggered by Europe's reaction to Russia's aggression against Ukrainian sovereignty - marked a decisive reversal in French foreign policy, as Paris adopted unprecedented stances and concrete measures, signaling a level of hostility toward Moscow not seen in recent history. This turning point poses significant challenges to bilateral relations and broader Eurasian interactions. Consequently, the current geopolitical context underscores the continued relevance of this subject, despite the extensive research conducted by scholars in the past.

Thus, after having outlined the historical and identity-based foundations of Franco-Russian relations, as well as the genesis and persistence of the myth of the "privileged relationship", it is essential to present the methodology employed in this thesis to analyse the construction of this narrative, its influence on the foreign policies of both countries, and the process by which it can be deconstructed.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Although Franco-Russian relations have never been without challenges, they have nonetheless given rise to moments of opportunity, cooperation, peace, and relative stability, resulting in a distinctive relationship that has few equals in Europe. France's predominant role in leading the dialogue with Russia is deeply rooted in an age-old heritage. Through various examples of diplomatic initiatives, the thesis explores the myth of the "privileged relation" and its deconstruction. In this regard, political discourses and official speeches provide valuable material for assessing the foreign policies of both countries over time. Thus, the research is grounded in a specific methodological framework of discourse analysis, which serves as the theoretical foundation for the work presented.

The method of deconstructing a political discourse to explain how a myth is founded has a long-standing history in the study of political science. Borrowing from sociology, the philosopher Roland Barthes contributed to this line of thought, with his influential work *Mythologies*, written in 1956, where he asserted: "*Myth is a word. It is not only defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it is uttered*".⁷

According to his formulation, the myth is therefore an idea through which a system of thought codified within society enables individuals to think and give a particular meaning to the object. From this perspective, myths are not simply falsehoods or fabrications; rather, they function as structured systems of signification that enable individuals and societies to interpret, rationalize, and assign meaning to specific phenomena. Applying this theoretical framework to the topic under discussion, one can argue that the narrative surrounding the so-called "privileged relationship" between France and Russia operates as a modern political myth. This narrative reflects a particular way of conceptualising the ties built up among two countries - shaped by their diplomats and political leaders' speeches - in order to give meaning to a specific imaginary, in this case, the fact that both states are portrayed as close partners who accord each other a distinctive status. In doing so, their historical and diplomatic interactions are "mythologised".⁸

⁷ Roland Barthes, "Le Mythe Aujourd'hui," in *Mythologies* (Éditions du Seuil, 1957), 181–82.

⁸ Serge Zenkine, "L'esthétique Du Mythe et La Dialectique Du Signe Chez Roland Barthes," *Littérature* 108, no. 4 (1997): 102–24.

In the same direction, in her seminal 2020 work, *Athens: history of a city between myth and politics*, the historian Sonia Darthou took an interest in the way in which myths emerged from political and historical discourse during Ancient Greece. She studied the presence of myths in Athenian speeches, demonstrating how, whether in political or legal rhetoric, they help to better understand their history. According to her, myths are not mere stories designed solely to entertain, but rather effective rhetorical tools, that contribute to constructing arguments by convincing and legitimising in order to shape political identity. Most often integrated into the political past without any disjunction between mythical and historical temporality, they become part of the collective memory and play a paradigmatic role. Furthermore, she also acknowledges that mythic construction is not inherently positive; depending on how rhetorical tools are employed, the resulting myth can serve negative or even destructive political ends. Here again, her framework can be transposed to the contemporary context examined in our case study, replacing Athenian gods and heroes with French and Russian leaders. Just as Greek orators shaping civic identity and legitimising authority, they invoke symbolic narratives and historical imaginaries to construct and sustain the notion of a “privileged bilateral relationship”. In both contexts, myth functions as a rhetorical strategy that blurs the boundaries between narrative and reality, shaping public perception and reinforcing political agendas.⁹

Finally, in 2024, three scholars - namely Katja Freistein, Frank Gadinger and Stefan Groth -adapted the discourse analysis approach specifically to International Relations issues, with a model called the Narrative Analysis. The authors define the concept as follows: “*This Narrative Analysis should be seen as a methodological and conceptual approach to analysing the political nature of storytelling and its possible impact on world politics*”.¹⁰

Thanks to its International Relations foundations, the model holds strong analytical potential for examining the formation and evolution of foreign policy. In this regard, the goal is to provide a framework for analysing narratives related to diplomacy and relations between states. To achieve this aim, the model intends to use official declarations to show how myth is being constructed, how it influences political perceptions, and serves specific interests. Rooted in the discourse-analytical tradition, official documents and speeches - primarily from high-level political actors - are used as the primary source material for this type of analysis.

⁹ Sonia Darthou, “Mythe et Parole Politique” in *Athènes: Histoire d’Une Cité Entre Mythe et Politique*, (Passés Composés, 2020), 199–228.

¹⁰ Katja Freistein, Frank Gadinger, and Stefan Groth, “Studying Narratives in International Relations,” *International Studies Perspectives*, October 29, 2024.

In our case, by employing this methodological approach, the thesis will provide a comprehensive and historical explanation of the emergence of the “special relationship” narrative between France and Russia. This analysis seeks to understand the external policy choices made by both nations through an in-depth exploration of the political discourse articulated by their respective official leaders. The diplomatic initiatives under discussion, which serve as examples supporting our argument, will therefore primarily consist of excerpts from speeches by political leaders.¹¹

However, one potential critique of this narrative analysis lies in the fact that its conceptual framework predominantly focuses on the examination of discourses themselves, without critically interrogating the internal coherence or validity of their substance. While this approach is undoubtedly valuable for elucidating how myths are constructed within the field of international relations, it may lack the tools necessary for their critical deconstruction. This challenge will be addressed in the second and third chapters, engaging the exercise through the concept of Realpolitik, which will be explained in greater detail. Nevertheless, since the process of deconstruction cannot be achieved without understanding the myth’s construction and its impact, the Narrative Analysis Model remains useful. Our study of Franco-Russian relations within the European context is therefore fully consistent with this methodological framework.

¹¹ Katja Freistein, et al., *op.cit.*

CHAPTER 1/ THE MYTH OF A PRIVILEGED RELATIONSHIP

1. Understanding the Historical Nature of Franco-Russian Relations

1.1. Centuries-Old Relations

*“Russia being the only power able to counterbalance France, the latter would never lose the opportunity to weaken any force opposing it”*¹²

Antioch Dmitrievič Kantemir, Russian Ambassador to France, 1738

*“Millions of Russians and French suddenly felt that they loved each other with a very particular affection, that all Russians admired all French, and that all French admired all Russians. These feelings found their most unexpected expression in France last October”*¹³

Leo Tolstoy, about the Franco-Russian Alliance, 1894

1.1.1. The Earliest Origins

Like France, Russia is an old country with a history forged around a single people (for the most part), a unique capital and a continuity of statehood that has prevailed despite changes of dynasty and regime.¹⁴ While France was born with the coronation of Hugues Capet in 987, the ancestors of modern Russia are rooted in an older entity known as Kievan Rus'. This state, whose capital was therefore Kiev, was populated mainly by Slavs with multiple origins of which the Vikings. Under this dynasty of great princes, Princess Anne of Kiev married Henry I, King of France in 1052, making this union the first official connection between the two entities.

¹² Alfred Rambaud, *op.cit.* 435.

¹³ Lev Nikolaevič Tolstoj, *L'esprit Chrétien et Le Patriotisme* (Perrin, 1894), 1–6.

¹⁴ Pascal Gauchon, “Ce Cher et Vieux Pays,” in *Géopolitique de La France* (Presses Universitaires de France - PUF, 2012), 27–44.

As a result, all the kings of France who succeeded their son - King Philip I - had Kievan blood in their veins.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the legacy of the Kievan Rus', whose longevity spanned more than four centuries, is disputed. Although its capital is located in today's Ukraine, the Russian Tsars have always claimed it as their own, especially for the East Slavs who would later make up the majority of the Russian people, but also for their Empire, which included for several centuries the entire former territory of the Kievan Rus' realm. Historians have debated the heritage of this past, which Ukraine has attributed to itself at various stages of its national history. In fact, East Slavs also constitute the population of Ukraine, as well as Belarus.¹⁶ The founding myth of the Kievan Rus' is therefore more than relevant today. Both countries have their own narrative, and the truth hinges on the interpretation of many factors. One thing remains beyond dispute: the royal marriage of Anne of Kiev was the first trace of a relationship between France and a Slavic power, albeit this brief episode did not have any political impact on Franco-Russian relations.

The start of diplomatic relations between France and Russia most likely dates back to the 18th century, when a Tsar visited France for the first time in history. Indeed, in 1717, Peter the Great made a two-month trip to Paris, opening the door to Europe and marking an important moment in this relationship. He was accompanied by a number of artists and scholars, who also launched the beginning of cultural and scientific ties between the two countries. This period witnessed many artistic, cultural and even gastronomic connections, as the Russian-style method serving one dish after another, became a tradition in France.¹⁷ The Russian elite had a real fascination for Paris, which was seen as a place of reference and an essential destination. Great writers such as Montesquieu and Voltaire contributed to this Franco-Russian friendship. For many Russians, France was the embodiment of *grandeur* – which included beauty, justice, culture and human rights. As the historian Paul Bushkovitch recalls: “*Voltaire’s plays which performed in Russia, illustrated classic themes of the French enlightenment, religious tolerance, enlightened monarchy, and the struggle against superstition and the clergy. As the French language began to replace German at court in these years, French writers acquired a public in Russia*”.¹⁸

¹⁵ Paul Bushkovitch, “Russia before Russia,” in *A Concise History of Russia* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1–18.

¹⁶ Alexandra Goujon, ““Kiev Est La Mère Des Villes Russes.”,” in *L’Ukraine : De l’Indépendance à La Guerre* (Le Cavalier Bleu Editions, 2023), 17–24.

¹⁷ Alexandre Jevakhoff, “Interview Avec Xavier Fos,” *Club stratégies françaises*, April 10, 2021.

¹⁸ Paul Bushkovitch, “Two Empresses,” in *A Concise History of Russia* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 107–8.

Peter the Great even became an honorary member of the *Académie Française*, elected “*unanimously and by acclamation, out of all rank*”, remaining an exceptional event in the history of this institution. The two countries agreed to establish permanent diplomatic relations at the level of plenipotentiary ambassadors from that time onwards.¹⁹ However, after the death of the Russian emperor, diplomatic relations were interrupted by several French kings who made no secret of their hostility to Russia.

1.1.2. The 18th and 19th Centuries

However, the end of the 18th century brought the two countries closer together, with the long reigns of two very Francophile empresses. Elisabeth 1st introduced the French language to the Russian nobility, for discussions but also for official correspondence. Thus, for one century, every letter between a Minister and an Ambassador of the Russian Empire was written in French.²⁰ Then, in a second stage, Catherine II - Catherine the Great - worked to strengthen the links between the two countries and continue Peter the Great's efforts to westernize Russia, although relations with Louis XV were not easy at first.²¹ In 1787, a trade agreement was even signed, providing France with advantages in the new Russian ports on the Black Sea. Catherine also used French culture and arts to influence the Russian court. For instance, she received Diderot - with whom she frequently corresponded - in St Petersburg, where he served as her adviser for several months.²² During this period, Russia was also a land of refuge for many aristocrats fleeing the French Revolution, which the imperial court had condemned unreservedly. Although neighboring countries remained a more popular destination for these emigrants, more than 10,000 French found asylum in Russia between 1789 and 1815.²³ Several of them joined the army - paradoxically even against Napoleon I - or the Russian administration, such as the 5th Duke of Richelieu, who served as Governor of Odessa for more than ten years.²⁴

After the Battle of Friedland in 1807, Napoleon Bonaparte met Tsar Alexander I in Tilsit to discuss a strategic alliance in Europe, particularly against England. The two rulers understood

¹⁹ Konstantin Kossatchev and Christian Cambon, “France-Russie : Dialogue Parlementaire Pour Rétablir La Confiance,” Sénat, 2018.

²⁰ Alexandre Jevakhoff, *op.cit.*

²¹ Deborah Caquet, “Les Géostratégies de Catherine II,” Les Clionautes, November 8, 2021.

²² Paul Bushkovitch, “Catherine the Great,” in *A Concise History of Russia* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 125.

²³ Rémy Chamousset, *Les Émigrés Français En Russie, 1789-1815* (Histoire, 2011), 6–7.

²⁴ Romani Yakemtchouk, “La Précarité Des Relations Politiques Franco-Russes,” in *La France et La Russie. Alliances et Discordances* (Editions L’Harmattan, 2011), 5–28.

and respected each other. If this peace had been respected, the fate of Europe could have been stabilised for a long time around the two Empires. After their final confrontation five years later, Alexander, after losing his “greatest enemy”, emphasised: “*all the French, besides him, are well regarded by me; it is up to them to have me as a friend*”.²⁵ Despite the tragic end, Napoleon still occupied Moscow for more than a month, leaving an indelible memory of an event that rarely occurs in Russian history. During the Congress of Vienna in 1815, unlike other powers coming with a spirit of revenge, the Russians were more indulgent with France, pragmatic about the future of their relationship with the aim of maintaining a political balance in Europe. Thanks mainly to the diplomatic genius of its foreign affairs Minister Talleyrand, France will regain its 1791 borders almost unchanged, as a result of this conference.²⁶

In the same dynamic, the 19th century represents perhaps the apogee of Franco-Russian cultural influences and exchanges, with art, music, and literature all contributing to this common fascination. Some of the great writers who are now part of the Russian heritage, such as Turgenev and Tolstoy, spent several years in France.²⁷ Many painters also came to Paris to learn and draw inspiration, sharing their methods with French artists. In the second half of the century, Paris was home to an exceptional concentration of Russian painters. The masters of the “*itinerant*” Russian realist movement, such as Vassily Perov, Alexey Bogolyubov and Ilya Repin, all spent a lot of time in Paris.²⁸ Later, the middle of the century saw a period of most serious tension between the two Empires, with France allying against Russia alongside the Ottomans and the British during the Crimean War (1853-56).²⁹ Although it was significant for Russians, this period has been counterbalanced at the end of the century, with a climax of their cordial relations: between 1891 and 1893 the French President Sadi Carnot and Tsar Alexander III signed the Franco-Russian Alliance. The latter even gave his name to the famous bridge built for the 1900 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris, as a symbol of the friendship between France and Russia. Beyond the military and geostrategic agreement to counterbalance German power, the alliance was also a time of great cultural and linguistic rapprochement between the two peoples. One century later, a report by the French Senate Foreign Affairs Committee even

²⁵ Romain Yakemtchouk, “Les Tsars Russes Face à La France,” in *La France et La Russie. Alliances et Discordances* (Editions L’Harmattan, 2011), 29–64.

²⁶ Marie-Pierre Rey, “La Russie, Les Russes et Le Congrès de Vienne,” *Austriaca* 84, no. 1 (2017): 113–36.

²⁷ Laetitia Le Guay and Jean-Claude Loiseau, “Tourgueniev, Le Russe de Bougival (1818-1883),” *France Culture* (Radio France, October 27, 2009).

²⁸ Tatiana Mojenok, “The Russian Realistic Painters in France (1860-1900),” 1999.

²⁹ Bénédicte Rolland-Villemot, “La Guerre de Crimée et Le Traité de Paris : Un Enjeu Géopolitique En Méditerranée,” *Cahiers Slaves* 14, no. 1 (January 1, 2016): 123–33.

described the atmosphere of the deal as “French Russomania”. The visit of Alexander’s son, Nicolas II, illustrates this closeness since his presence created such a frenzy that almost a million provincials flocked to Paris to cheer the imperial couple. The Tsar then declared: “*It is not only the alliance that exists between us, but a safe, cordial and fraternal friendship*”.³⁰ The opposite was certainly also true, with the Russian elite showing an ever-increasing interest in France. In fact, it was at the end of the Romanov era that it became popular to visit Nice, Cannes or Biarritz, with the imperial court’s desire to build magnificent villas and churches. As a result, by 1914, there were 600 Russian owners in the city of Nice, and the largest Orthodox cathedral outside Russia was erected in the same place.³¹ Likewise, in 1909, the Catholic church of Notre Dame de Lourdes was built in St Petersburg for the French community, which General de Gaulle visited in 1966.

The Franco-Russian alliance at the end of the 19th century also had an economic dimension, with a large number of loans and trade deals. In 1914, French investments in Russia accounted for 31.2% of the total, ahead of British (24%) and German (19%) capitals.³² At the meantime, held by 1,5 millions of French investors, Russian bonds, amounted to 11.5 billion francs in 1914, i.e. half of French savings. These loans, then cancelled by the Bolsheviks in 1917, proved to be a disaster for their holders.³³

1.1.3. Crucial Alliances During World Wars I and II

Shortly afterwards, the military alliance played a major role during the First World War, when Russia joined the conflict against Germany, following the latter’s offensive against France in 1914. During the Battle of the Marne, the Russians opened a front in East Prussia, forcing German troops to be sent eastwards, and thus making a significant contribution to the French victory, which allowed Paris to be saved. Russia paid therefore a very high price at the outbreak of the war, losing more than 700,000 soldiers and 60,000 officers between August 1914 and April 1915.

³⁰ Romain Yakemtchouk, “Une Alliance Franco-Russe,” in *In La France et La Russie. Alliances et Discordances* (Editions L’Harmattan, 2011), 65–80.

³¹ Alexandre Jevakhoff, *op.cit.*

³² *Ibidem.*

³³ Romain Yakemtchouk, *op.cit.*

Marshal Joseph Joffre later expressed his gratitude for it: “*Anticipating all our hopes, Russia engaged the battle at the same time as we did. By this act of loyal confraternity of arms all the more meritorious, as the Russian concentration was by no means complete, the Tsar’s army and Grand Duke Nicholas deserve France’s gratitude*”³⁴

Russian brigades even fought on French soil in 1916, and in the summer of the same year, their implications in the Brusilov offensive - named after the General who launched it - eased the threat posed by the German army in the East of France and the Austro-Hungarian forces in the North of Italy, by attacking on the Polish front. It is known to be bloodiest military campaign of the First World War on all fronts, causing the death of more than 400,000 soldiers and a million wounded, over three times more than the battle of Verdun which lasted half as long. However, the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 put an end to the diplomatic relations of the two countries, which only restarted when General de Gaulle came to power. Before that, the peace of Brest-Litovsk established with Germany has been seen by the French as a serious betrayal of the Franco-Russian alliance. During this cold period, it is worth noting that a significant proportion of Russians supporters - or those close to - the Tsarist regime sought refuge in France from 1917 onwards. Paradoxically, it is amusing to observe that before the Revolution, Lenin had sheltered in Paris, where he remained for long periods between 1895 and 1912.³⁵ Thus, the defenders of the imperial regime replaced their adversaries, choosing for many of them, the same place of exile. These families, known as the “White Russians”, fled by millions all over Europe. Although the data is imprecise, some scholars have put forward some figures. For instance, in 1925, according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), around 1,100,000 people left Russia, other sources suggested much higher numbers. While most of them found exile in the countries bordering Russia, around 400,000 settled in France, including 150,000 in Paris.

This choice was not insignificant, as the French language was widely spoken by these populations, with many links already existing between the two countries. The special relationship is perceived as being able to offer work opportunities and to help restore stability.³⁶ Built in 1927 when the first of these populations died, the Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois’ cemetery has become the largest Russian necropolis abroad. Major place of remembrance with over

³⁴ Michel de Rosen, “Il Y a Cent Ans, La Russie Sauvait La France ,” *Revue Des Deux Mondes*, 2015.

³⁵ David Charpentier, “Histoire : Sur Les Traces de Lénine à Paris,” *Le Parisien*, October 29, 2017.

³⁶ Alexandre Jevakhoff, *Les Russes Blancs* (Editions Tallandier, 2007), 56.

15,000 people buried, it is a visible trace of the Russian presence in France and a witness to its identity. For Russians, it is the symbol of a society that collapsed in its country of origin but managed to reestablish itself, becoming an integral part of the historical and cultural landscape of its new homeland. The visit of President Putin in 2000 and Patriarch Alexis in 2007 testifies to its importance.³⁷ Moreover, the 1947 founding of the weekly *La Pensée Russe* (“The Russian Thinking”) in Paris, reveals the influence of the White Russian community during this period. It has the record of being the oldest Russian-language newspaper published in Europe outside Russia.

During the Soviet period, relations between France and Russia alternated between tensions and attempts for rapprochement, with alliances sometimes ephemeral, such as the Treaty of Mutual Assistance of 1935, signed by French Prime Minister Pierre Laval. Lastly, during the Second World War, even though the Nazi-Soviet Pact had reversed the alliances, the latter was broken in 1941 by the German attack on the Eastern Front. Stalin then returned to the Allies and the Soviets paid a terrible price for final victory and France’s liberation, with over 23 million dead. This fraternity of arms against Nazism has also been illustrated by the close relationship between the air forces of the two countries, particularly with the *Normandy-Niemen* fighter squadron. This division was the only contingent among the Western forces to be sent to the Eastern Front to fight alongside the Red Army. At the end of 1944, they were the first French soldiers to enter Germany. During the same months, Charles de Gaulle – at that time President of the Provisional Government of the French Republic - spent eight days in Moscow to renew his alliance with Stalin’s Russia.

³⁷ Vasileios Pnevmatikakis, “L’émigration Russe et La Naissance d’Une Orthodoxie Française 1925-1953,” *Slavica Bruxellensia*, no. 8 (July 5, 2012).

1.2. De Gaulle and Rapprochement

*“For France and Russia, being united means being strong; being separated means being in danger. The truth is that there is something of a categorical imperative here, in terms of geography, experience and common sense”*³⁸

Charles de Gaulle, 1944

*“Relations with France have always occupied a prominent place in the USSR's European and international policies”*³⁹

Andrei Gromyko, 1989

1.2.1. Stalin and the Post-War Period

On 10th December 1944 in Moscow, General de Gaulle and Stalin concluded an alliance which precluded any possibility of a separate peace and committed the parties to providing each other aid and assistance until the final victory. For France, this was the first international treaty since it had regained its political freedom. The agreement encouraged de Gaulle to restore France's position as a great power before the war was even over. In addition, the treaty called on both parties to block any German initiative that might lead to new attempts of aggression after the war, paving also the foundations for mutual economic assistance. Despite this previous agreement, de Gaulle was kept out of the two major international conferences - Yalta and Potsdam - that would shape the post-war era and the future of Europe. France therefore found itself excluded from the negotiations between the “big three” and forced to accept the new world order. Yet, thanks to De Gaulle's efforts, the country reconsidered its role in the division of Germany and Berlin with a French zone allocated in both. The French President also succeeded in imposing its voice after long months of negotiation, by obtaining a seat as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Along with the three main victorious powers - the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia - France was thus granted the right of veto, which enabled these countries alone - as well as China - to oppose a resolution. Like France, the USSR also defended the aim of finding mutual solutions, only

³⁸ Romain Yakemtchouk, “L'Appel de Charles de Gaulle. Le Traité d'Alliance Franco-Soviétique,” in *La France et La Russie. Alliances et Discordances* (Editions L'Harmattan, 2011), 109–19.

³⁹ Andrej Andreevic Gromyko, “Memoirs” (Doubleday, New-York, 1989), 115-117.

acceptable through real consensus. Soviet diplomats supported therefore the idea that all UNSC decisions should be taken unanimously, as opposed to the Americans, who wanted to adopt the majority rule. According to Soviet foreign policy, the basis for effective action meant unanimity and veto of the five powers, if this was not achieved. France, which supported this position, enjoyed this right partly thanks to the action of the USSR's diplomacy in these negotiations.⁴⁰

Hence, Franco-Russian relations were no exception to this multilateral context, which was taking on fundamental importance in inter-state relations. After the Berlin blockade (1948-49), which resulted in the birth of the two German republics, France sought to play a major role despite its marginal position compared to the other great powers. In order to pursue its strategic interests while it finally cooperated with the Western allies, Paris sought at the same time to limit German ambitions. Nevertheless, the United States' influence and the maintenance of its troops in Europe via the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) gradually increased the distance from the USSR. France was one of the first countries to sign up to NATO in 1949 as well as to the Marshall Plan, founding its foreign policy closer to its American ally, another actor that have played a decisive role in liberation and victory over Nazi Germany.⁴¹ This rapprochement towards the US had consequences, such as the 1954 Paris Convention ending Germany's occupation, giving back German sovereignty and evoking its remilitarisation. The Soviets, absolutely hostile to this treaty at the beginning of the Cold War, condemned the French position and broke the Franco-Soviet agreements of 1944.⁴²

As the bipolar world took shape and France's mistrust of the USSR was growing, the government changed its stance and decided to build a strong and independent Europe. Back in power in 1958 with his 5th Republic, General de Gaulle launched a policy under which France would increasingly weigh on the world and be able to defend its interests as independently as possible. In this context, France acquired nuclear weapons and developed civil nuclear energy. To put this policy of "relations with everyone" into practice, de Gaulle decided to renew diplomatic relations with the USSR, without asking Washington's opinion. To this end, Nikita Khrushchev was warmly received in Paris in 1960, however the project for a peace conference,

⁴⁰ Andrej Andreevic Gromyko, *op.cit.*

⁴¹ Jacques Bariéty, "La France et La Crise Internationale Du Blocus de Berlin," *Histoire, Économie et Société* 13, no. 1 (1994): 29-44.

⁴² Romain Yakemtchouk, "La Fin de La Seconde Guerre Mondiale. La Guerre Froide. La France et l'URSS Se Retrouvent Dans Deux Camps Opposés.," in *La France et La Russie. Alliances et Discordances* (Editions Le Harmattan, 2011), 119-40.

in which France wanted to act as an intermediary, failed to succeed. East-West détente was therefore only partially achieved, but this official trip still marked the first visit by a Russian Head of state since the 1917 revolution, underlining the restoration of good relations between France and the Soviet Union. Several trade agreements were signed, with a sharp increase in Russian exports to France concerning numerous raw materials and agricultural products in exchange for a Soviet commitment to major industrial contracts. Even though political cooperation between France and the Soviet Union was far from perfect during the Cold War, cultural relations remained strong, with the Russian intellectual class showing an ever-increasing interest in French culture. Gradually, French artists were also getting closer to Russian culture. The Minister of Culture, André Malraux, maintained very good relations with Soviet personalities from the world of arts and letters. Many Russian artists and scholars chose to settle in France, denouncing the lack of freedom under the Soviet regime. The study of Russian as a foreign language was strengthened, whereas the study of French was already considerably advanced in Russia.⁴³

1.2.2. De Gaulle's Détente

With the accession of Leonid Brezhnev to power in 1964, Franco-Soviet relations were given a new impetus, with positive diplomatic changes that had previously been hampered by the Cold War. Official visits by French and Russian foreign ministers - M. Couve de Murville and A. Gromyko - increased from 1965 onwards. The two political leaders affirmed their desire to establish a climate of détente in Europe. They agreed on the Vietnam conflict and expressed their strict opposition to West Germany nuclear weapons acquisition. These common stances were also fueled by a degree of anti-Americanism shared by the two countries following President Johnson's policy shift and the simmering Franco-American diplomatic crisis. This period of large cooperation was illustrated by General de Gaulle's three-week triumphal visit to the USSR in June 1966. This travel had a profound effect on the dialogue between Paris and Moscow.⁴⁴

⁴³ Romain Yakemtchouk, *op.cit.*

⁴⁴ Charles De Gaulle, "Charles de Gaulle, Paroles Publiques - Voyage En URSS ," INA, 2016.

Agreements were concluded regarding many areas - economic, scientific, technological, and even space -, a direct and permanent communication line was set up between the Élysée Palace and the Kremlin. In Leningrad (St Petersburg), more than 700,000 people were massed to welcome General de Gaulle, who declared: *“The France of always is visiting the Russia of always. Since the time when our two nations were born, they have never ceased to feel a particular interest and attraction for each other.”*⁴⁵

This period was also characterised by France’s withdrawal from NATO’s integrated military command structure in 1966. This disengagement was obviously greatly appreciated by the Soviets, who considered it as a clear sign of independence, showing the world that France wanted to distance itself from American tutelage.⁴⁶ In the same vein, a few months after General de Gaulle’s journey, Prime Minister A. Kosygin visited France, enabling the agreements already sealed to be further deepened. He expressed: *“The development of events in Europe and beyond its limits proves, ever more convincingly, the usefulness and beneficence of the Soviet French rapprochement which exerts a great and positive influence on international life.”*⁴⁷

The implementation of these new relations, intending to foster mutual understanding and cooperation, has set a decade of stability based on friendship between the two countries. The frequency of contacts at the highest level and the resulting agreements reached by the two sides prove it perfectly. In his memoirs, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko underlines the quality of these meetings in an entire chapter devoted to his country’s relations with France. He describes the development of common foreign policies and the relationships with the French political administration. A. Gromyko was a former member of the *Politburo*, ending up as Soviet Supreme Chairman. In total, he spent 28 years as head of Russian diplomacy, serving all the Soviet leaders from Stalin to Gorbachev, interacting with nine American presidents. When he died, former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger said in his tribute that there had been no equivalent of what he represented in any other country in the 20th century.⁴⁸ Andrei Gromyko has been able to accurately describe the dialogue he cultivated with France and the five presidents he worked with.

⁴⁵ Romain Yakemtchouk, “Le Retour Du Général de Gaulle Au Pouvoir,” in *La France et La Russie. Alliances et Discordances* (Editions L’Harmattan, 2011), 141–63.

⁴⁶ Marie-Pierre Rey, “1964-1969, l’Essor Des Relations Bilatérales a l’Ère Gaullienne,” in *La Tentation Du Rapprochement* (Éditions de la Sorbonne, 1992), 31–68.

⁴⁷ Charles De Gaulle, “Charles de Gaulle, Paroles Publiques - Arrivée de M. Kossyguine à Paris ,” *INA*, 1966.

⁴⁸ Henry Kissinger, “Foreword”, in *Memoirs* by Andrej Andreevic Gromyko (Doubleday, New-York, 1989), viii.

Among his many missions in France, Charles de Gaulle left him a deep impression: “*the name of de Gaulle belongs among the great names of France, an outstanding statesman which was also one of the most perspicacious politicians in the West, playing a major part in the creation and development of the process of détente.*”⁴⁹

He proceeded in this way, describing Franco-Soviet relations and the positive intensification of trade at that time, skillfully using the metaphor of a “*breeze of détente*” which had “*gathered strength in subsequent years and became a benign wind blowing over Europe, given powerful impulse.*”⁵⁰ These qualities, which the head of Russian diplomacy acknowledges in his memoirs, were manifested at different times in Charles de Gaulle’s life as a statesman. The answer that he used to give to his cabinet associates when they wondered why he was always referring to “Russia” - and not the Soviet Union - may illustrate the pragmatism that Gromyko alludes: “*The Soviet Union is here, but it will pass away, whereas Russia is eternal.*”⁵¹ These summits and discussions remained regular even after General de Gaulle’s death, despite the various international crises that occasionally troubled them in the late 1960s (cf. Israel, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Algeria). It emphasised the long-term nature of the relations that the French President managed to establish. The radically different nature of the two regimes never appeared to be a problem, as the authorities of both sides pursued officially a policy of non-interference in domestic affairs.⁵²

1.2.3. *The Gaullist Legacy*

This foreign policy of relative openness with Russia was upheld under the mandates of Georges Pompidou and Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, with new commercial agreements. Between 1970 and 1974, industrial trade between the two countries increased. President Pompidou visited Russia in 1970, and L. Brezhnev went to France the following year, paying a visit to Lenin’s flat during his exile. In 1973, two additional meetings with different deal on both sides confirmed a continuity in the existing cooperation. A new economic agreement was signed in 1974. In total, until 1980, more than ten meetings and official trips were organised between the Heads of state of the two countries, not to mention the numerous interministerial trips. The

⁴⁹ Andrej Andreevic Gromyko, *op.cit.*, 187-194

⁵⁰ *Ibidem.*

⁵¹ Michel de Rosen, *op.cit.*

⁵² Marie-Pierre Rey, *op.cit.*

relationship deteriorated however significantly in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. This triggered a period of frozen bilateral relations and a sharp slowdown in the process of détente that France had tried to promote in the previous years, committing to this objective as a principle of its foreign policy. As a sign of disapproval, after 1981 with François Mitterrand's election, France deprived the USSR of political contacts at the highest level, a tradition that had been established a few years before. Yet, the French administration was attentive in preserving the trade relations that had been strengthened, especially by the Soviet gas contract. Although the new Socialist President's policy towards the USSR was firmer, he still maintained dialogue while asserting his positions.

Foreign Minister Roland Dumas summarised this new framework in Franco-Soviet relations: *“Reminding us of the secular friendship between the Russian and French peoples, yes; but France’s refusal to make any concessions on the foundations of its policy, which are its own security and the respect for individual freedoms”*.⁵³

In 1982, France supported and financed a Euro-Soviet gas pipeline project, although this cooperation has been disapproved by R. Reagan's administration. At the death of L. Brezhnev - who had been in power for 18 years - the French President paid tribute to the leader by declaring his deep friendship with the Soviet people. After a more troubled period, F. Mitterrand expressed in 1983 his desire to re-establish good relations with *“the great Russian people who contributed to the restoration of freedom in France by crushing Hitler’s Germany during the Second World War”*. He visited the USSR for the first time the following year.⁵⁴

Finally, in 1985, the new General Secretary of the Communist Party and Head of State, Mikhail Gorbachev, chose France as his first foreign visit. This weighty decision intended to reaffirm the importance of the dialogue with Paris, which had been slightly marred by different scandals and divergent diplomatic positions on the international stage. F. Mitterrand went in return to Moscow in 1986, where he reiterated France's enthusiasm for the Russian policy of reconstruction and freedom (*Perestroika* and *Glasnost*). He also praised the progress on disarmament and showed his optimism for the future of East-West relations. In October 1986, the Soviet leader gave an interview on French TV in which he declared the need for the USSR

⁵³ Romain Yakemtchouk, “La Présidence de Mitterrand. La Perestroïka de Gorbatchev,” in *La France et La Russie. Alliances et Discordances* (Editions L'Harmattan, 2011), 181–200.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

to build a new foreign policy based on a more flexible and democratic line. This new thinking agenda - *Novoïe Myshlenie* - was part of the well-known “Common European Home”, set out for the first time in 1987, as a necessary framework. In 1989, M. Gorbachev repeated the expression at the podium of the Council of Europe in a famous speech, invoking Victor Hugo and emphasising Russia’s European roots. Calling for the end of the East-West confrontation, he argued for the reunification of a separate Europe, but still also stressed the socialist nature of its eastern part. That same year, Gorbachev told the French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, while he was visiting Moscow: “*The changes that are taking place in Eastern Europe are an instrument that should enable us to move forward together on the road to democratisation*”⁵⁵

From the end of 1989, Gorbachev was confronted with a process that was accelerating and eluding him. The fall of the Berlin Wall led directly, less than a year later, to the reunification of Germany, to which France had always been reluctant on the side of the USSR. François Mitterrand’s ties with the Soviet Union prevailed, as he was keen to continue fostering close relations with the Soviet leaders in the interests of “European security”. To this end, the French President made two visits to the USSR, in December 1989 and May 1990, before welcoming M. Gorbachev in Southwest France in October 1991. New cooperation agreements were concluded in a number of areas. Mitterrand declared following this meeting: “*What we have to do together, first of all, is to build a solid, peaceful and constructive Franco-Soviet relationship.*”⁵⁶

On 25 December 1991, when Michail Gorbachev resigned as President of the Soviet Union following Belovezha Accords - or Minsk Agreements - he promptly received a phone call from the French President. These agreements have been of major importance as it created the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) between the three former Slavic republics that composed the defunct USSR, which was therefore no longer subject to international law. With Belarus and Ukraine, the Russian Federation declares its independence while taking on the legacy of the Soviet past. Its rising figure, Boris Yeltsin, who had already established himself in Moscow - as President of the Socialist Federal Republic within the USSR - became its leader.

⁵⁵ Sophie Momzikoff, “Aux Origines de La Maison Commune Européenne de Gorbatchev : Influences et Concepteurs (Années 1970-1989),” *Histoire Politique*, no. 46 (February 1, 2022).

⁵⁶ François Mitterrand and Mikhaïl Gorbatchev, “Rencontre à Latche : L’interview Conjointe” *INA*, 2016.

1.3. Jacques Chirac, a “Pro-Russian” President

*“Franco-Russian relations have always been and will continue to be privileged, friendly and based on trust.”*⁵⁷

Vladimir Putin, 2004

*“The Franco-Russian friendship is part of the history of our two countries. It is anchored in the hearts of the French people. It constitutes a priority of our foreign policy.”*⁵⁸

Jacques Chirac, 2000

1.3.1. The Aftermath of the Soviet Collapse

The end of the Cold War transformed Franco-Russian relations: in 1992, a bilateral Treaty indicated a “new entente” based on “trust, solidarity and attachment to the values of freedom and democracy”.⁵⁹ The arrival of Boris Yeltsin and his desire to transform Russia were very well received by French diplomacy. The new Russian President saw it as a sign of “recognition”, he even stressed that France’s support was crucial for obtaining the NATO-Russia Founding Act on 27 May 1997. The efforts of Jacques Chirac - who succeeded François Mitterrand in the 1995 presidential elections - were hailed for this action. Signed in Paris, this agreement was an important step forward in post-Cold War relations between Russia and the West, establishing a joint council that would come into force in 2002 and a permanent cooperation with NATO. After the Soviet hegemony, this commitment seems an historic step towards peace and stability. While attempting to address Russian concerns about NATO enlargement, it also intends to promote transparency on security issues, including the reduction

⁵⁷ Jacques Chirac, “Conférence de Presse Conjointe de M. Jacques Chirac, Président de La République, de M. Vladimir Poutine, Président de Russie et de M. Gerhard Schroeder, Chancelier Allemand, Sur La Prise En Otage de Deux Journalistes Français En Irak, l’Élection Présidentielle En Tchétchénie, Le Risque de Développement d’Armes Nucléaires En Iran et La Coopération Entre l’UE et La Russie, Sotchi”, August, 31, 2004.

⁵⁸ Jacques Chirac, “Message de M. Jacques Chirac, Président de La République, Adressé à M. Vladimir Poutine à l’Occasion de Son Élection à La Présidence de La Fédération de Russie, Sur Les Inquiétudes Suscitées Par l’Intervention Russe En Tchétchénie, Le Sort de l’Otage Brice Fleutiaux, Les Engagements Pris Par La Russie à Lisbonne Pour Un Règlement Politique Du Conflit et Sur l’Invitation Officielle Du Président Russe En France, Paris”, March, 27, 2000.

⁵⁹ Anne de Tinguay, “Russie : La France En Quête de Paradigme,” *Les Dossiers Du CERI*, 2017.

of regional forces and conflicts. If some background tensions were illustrating the limits of a partnership based on divergent interests, this process has provided a new framework for dialogue and partnership around collective security in Europe.⁶⁰ French foreign policy at the time aimed to maintain balance on the international stage and therefore supported this vision. At the first NATO-Russia summit in May 2002, French President formulated: *“The time has come to take a new step and welcome Russia as a full partner in an equal Council. Today we welcome this new step towards the emergence of a more united and harmonious continent, in which Russia will be able to play the role of great nation that it has never ceased to be through the vicissitudes of history. In this way, together, we will be able to meet the new security challenges facing the Euro-Atlantic area.”*⁶¹

The French position of integration and rapprochement with Russia is visible in J. Chirac’s pacification strategy. In the 1990s, several agreements were signed, reflecting the growing need for closer ties: an increase in trade, the creation of a Franco-Russian commission for art, education, youth exchanges and sport, a commitment by the joint foreign ministers to meet at least twice a year, a joint space project, etc. The Great Parliamentary Committee France-Russia was set up on 24th October 1995, with the aim of promoting political relations between the two nations. This committee is a permanent body meeting once a year between the two respective parliaments - the French National Assembly and the Russian State Duma – in order to deal with various common issues. Bilateral committees of this nature are not common at the time with only a few equivalents with other countries. During the sixth edition, held in Moscow in October 2000, the President of the State Duma Gennadiy Seleznyov, emphasised this unique nature in his opening speech: *“Our parliamentary contacts have a long history and are now a key event in the life of our two countries. The fact that we are meeting for the sixth time testifies to the vitality of our Commission and creates good conditions to successfully carry out the tasks of sharing experience in legislative activities and developing common approaches to resolving bilateral and international problems. Cooperation between Russia and France is an important factor in world politics and helps to strengthen peace and mutual understanding in Europe.”*⁶²

⁶⁰ NATO, “Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation Signed in Paris, France,” *NATO*, May 27, 1997.

⁶¹ NATO, “Intervention de Monsieur Jacques Chirac, Président de La République Devant Le Conseil OTAN-Russie,” *NATO*, 2002.

⁶² Assemblée Nationale, “Rapport Sur Le 6e Session de La Grande Commission Parlementaire France-Russie - Activités Parlementaires Internationales - Les Commissions Parlementaires Bilatérales - Grande Commission France - Chine - Fichiers Cachés Pages Internationales - Assemblée Nationale,” 2019.

This committee organised its work into four main areas: strategic stability to strengthen peace and international security; EU-Russia cooperation in the context of the French Presidency; development of the economic and trade partnership; and cultural links. The report of these discussions reveals the prominent place that France accords to Russia - and vice versa. The Russian MPs also gave evidence that France seems to understand Russia and its complexity better than other Western countries and can therefore serve as an example to follow in the European dialogue.⁶³ During a visit to Paris in 1999, the new head of Russian diplomacy, Igor Ivanov, declared that the friendship between the two presidents was a sign of great progress in Franco-Russian cooperation. A year later, when Jacques Chirac appointed his new Ambassador to Moscow, Claude Blanchemaison, he addressed him in direct terms: “*It’s very simple, I want to have good relations with Russia*”.⁶⁴ In 1994, a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between the EU and Russia was signed in Corfu. The long-term aim was to establish a free trade area with advantageous commercial conditions.

During this period, France also supported Russia’s application to join the Council of Europe and encouraged closer ties with the European Community. Russia became a member of the Council of Europe in 1996, despite the reservations of some countries. Others, including France, preferred to opt for geopolitical pragmatism and democratic hope. Russia would hold the first presidency of the Council ten years later. While the country has made significant headway on different issues relating to law and freedoms, other commitments have struggled to be kept. For these reasons, its presence in the Council has always provoked debate in public opinion and among the member states.⁶⁵ Moreover, when Russia has been threatened with exclusion on several occasions since 2014, France has always expressed its support.⁶⁶ French diplomacy can also be credited for playing a leading role in the transformation of the “Group of Seven” (G7) - ardently desired by Moscow - in particular by co-chairing with Boris Yeltsin in April 1996 an eight-party meeting on nuclear safety issues. The format became then reality at the Denver summit in June 1997. France’s motives were essentially geopolitical, given that Russia’s economy was still in the midst of restructuring after the collapse of the USSR. In 1998, Russia formally joined the club of the most industrialised countries, and the G7 became the G8. At the end of the Chirac presidency, Russia hosted its first and only summit in St Petersburg

⁶³ Assemblée Nationale, *op.cit.*

⁶⁴ Romain Yakemtchouk, “L’écclatement de l’URSS. La Fédération de Russie. Eltsine Au Pouvoir,” in *La France et La Russie. Alliances et Discordances* (Editions L’Harmattan, 2011), 201–29.

⁶⁵ Jean-Pierre Massias, “La Russie et Le Conseil de l’Europe : Dix Ans Pour Rien ?,” 2007.

⁶⁶ Le Figaro, “La France Souhaite Que La Russie Reste Membre Du Conseil de L’Europe,” *Le Figaro*, 2019.

(2006), symbolising a return to the international diplomatic stage. French foreign policy also supported Russia's entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the Paris Club in 1997.

1.3.2. Vladimir Putin's Rise to Power

In 2001, under the first term of the new President Vladimir Putin, agreements were renewed, even extending the areas of cooperation (tourism, internal security, universities). A year later, Putin was received by Jacques Chirac in Paris for the second time. This State visit reaffirmed the friendship between the two peoples. In 2003, the two Heads of state were in perfect accordance with the Second Gulf War. In the aftermath of 11 September 2001 and the emergence of the Islamist threat, the United States launched its "war on terror", setting up an international coalition to intervene in Iraq. French and Russian positions were firmly opposed to the Bush administration's plan. French and Russian diplomacy worked very closely together, willing to seek a solution within the UN framework, both sharing the right of veto in the Security Council.⁶⁷ This rejection, unexpected from the Anglo-Saxon side, remains one of the most striking diplomatic moments of J. Chirac's two terms in office, marked by his harmony with Putin's diplomacy. Moreover, the two Presidents were feeling powerful, having the public opinion support in both their country. It makes no doubt that the outcome of this war has been an undeniable failure on the international stage, due to the instability it has caused. In this respect, history had then probably proved right those who had fought against this intervention, as France and Russia were two major powers. The Iraqi episode remains the catalyst of a certain Franco-Russian mutual understanding on the international stage, representing a pivotal moment when the two countries had been completely aligned. This common position also helped to bring the two Presidents much closer, showing great respect for each other ever since.⁶⁸

The consequences of this conflict also brought the two countries together in the common battle against jihadism, which has emerged as a growing threat in the years that followed. As a result, Russia - which was also a victim of Islamist terrorism - did not hesitate to take a clear stand in the Western camp. The shock provoked by the World Trade Center attacks had a global impact and gave rise to a desire for a joint international response. Consequently, a specific

⁶⁷ Céline Céline Bayou et al., "La Crise Irakienne," *Le Courrier Des Pays de L'Est* n° 1033, no. 3 (March 1, 2003) : 48-59.

⁶⁸ Henri Vernet, Christophe Bourdoiseau, and Marion L'Hour, "Jacques Chirac, l'Homme Qui a Dit Non à La Guerre En Irak," *Le Parisien*, September 26, 2019.

institutional bond was established between France and Russia on the matter, suggesting a common strategy between the two Ministries of Foreign Affairs. Regular meetings were held to develop common geopolitical axes. In 2004, a bloody hostage-taking incident in an North-Ossetian school, killing 334 people, produced a strong reaction from Paris. President Chirac reiterated the need to find a political solution to the Chechen Islamist terrorism's crisis.⁶⁹ From a pragmatic point of view however, cooperation between security services is more limited, given that the terrorism faced by the two states does not have the same origins (Maghreb and Mashreq for France, Chechnya for Russia). Many exchanges still occur on specific dossiers, as the 2006 investigation on the Chechen terrorist networks in France. These collaborative works have been crucial, albeit complex, as they depended on the degree of trust and mutual credibility between the services concerned.⁷⁰

1.3.3. Economic and Political Relations

Travelling officially in Russia seven times during his two terms in office, Jacques Chirac is the French President who has most visited this country. In 1997, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), which trains Russian diplomats. During this occasion, he claimed: *"There will be no European security without Russia's full involvement and active participation"*.

During their seven years of collaboration, and their (at least) 24 official meetings, Vladimir Putin and Jacques Chirac have forged personal links but also major contributions to their two countries. The political and economic cooperation has also been enabled and extended to many other sectors such as culture, energy, space, aeronautics, industry and agriculture. To provide two concrete examples, in 2006 one of Russia's biggest gas companies - *Gazprom* - was *Gaz de France*'s second largest supplier, accounting for 23% of its provisioning, with contracts renewed until 2030.⁷¹ On the other hand, since 1998, French automotive giant *Renault* has been marketing its cars in Russia via a joint venture, producing more than 160,000 vehicles in 2005, and twice that number in 2010. With almost 45,000 employees and a billion euros in sales, these

⁶⁹ Jean-Christophe Romer, "Les Relations Franco-Russes de 2000 à 2006. Entre Bilatéral et Multilatéral," *Centre Thucydide*, March 18, 2008.

⁷⁰ Nathalie Cettina, "France-Russie : Une Coopération Antiterroriste En Demi-Teinte", *Centre Français de Recherche Sur Le Renseignement*, June 30, 2006.

⁷¹ Jean-Michel Bezat, "Gazprom Prolonge l'Approvisionnement En Gaz de La France Jusqu'en 2030," *Le Monde*, December 20, 2006.

subsidiaries were contributing to a significant proportion of the company's business before 2022.⁷²

Finally, two pictures illustrate the special relations between the two Presidents at that time. In 2006, Putin received the *Légion d'Honneur* from his counterpart, during a discrete and private ceremony, creating already at the time huge controversy. In 2008, on the orders of his predecessor, President Medvedev - during the interlude of Putin's terms while adjusting the Constitution – honored Jacques Chirac with the Russian State Prize, notably for his role in developing bilateral relations. This award is the highest distinction that the Kremlin can bestow, and the former French President is the first foreign Head of state to have received it. These two symbols are powerful and may shed light on how the almost friendly relationship between the two leaders influenced diplomatic relations between France and Russia during this period. Jacques Chirac's Russophilia was not feigned and may have encouraged them. He used to love Russian culture, spoke its language and therefore had a special relationship with the country. When he died in 2019, Vladimir Putin was the only Head of state of a major power to attend the state funeral in Paris. On this occasion, he said that J. Chirac was one of the leaders who had impressed him the most in his career, due to his devotion and authority, but above all his talent as a visionary.⁷³

⁷² Romain Yakemtchouk, "L'écclatement de l'URSS. La Fédération de Russie. Eltsine Au Pouvoir," in *La France et La Russie. Alliances et Discordances* (Editions L'Harmattan, 2011), 201–29.

⁷³ Cornet Lavau and Camille Dauxert, "De Chirac à Macron, 22 Ans de Relations Diplomatiques Avec Poutine", *INA* 2022.

2. Multiple Attempts for Closer Ties

This part focuses on Franco-Russian relations since 2007, i.e. the links between Vladimir Putin and the three French Presidents he dealt with until today (Nicolas Sarkozy from 2007 to 2012; François Hollande from 2012 to 2017 and Emmanuel Macron since 2017). The diplomatic ties during this period cannot be fully covered by the study, therefore three strong actions that illustrate endeavors for convergence and alliance will be identified under each President. These foreign policy affairs are moments of rapprochement that contribute to acknowledge the Franco-Russian relation as privileged. There are to be opposed to the matters analyzed in the next chapter.

2.1. Nicolas Sarkozy's Presidency

*“France considers Russia as a friend and a strategic partner. President Medvedev, with whom I had to settled difficult and painful crises, has all my confidence”*⁷⁴

Nicolas Sarkozy, 2010

*“We have friendly relations based on partnership, not because it is a desire, but because it reflects our vision of Europe and concerns both our national interests”*⁷⁵

Dmitry Medvedev, 2010

2.1.1. The Georgian War

From 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency has been less euphoric than Jacques Chirac's period, but the new French President still had the desire to maintain good relations with Russia. The development of a trilateral axis was completed under his aegis. During his term in office, bilateral cooperation has been pursued in many of the sectors previously mentioned. Despite a campaign focused on human rights and concerns over Chechnya, the dialogue with Moscow was set up from the very beginning, with a determination to keep on going what Sarkozy thinks

⁷⁴ Nicolas Sarkozy, “Conférence de Presse Conjointe de MM. Nicolas Sarkozy, Président de La République, et Dimitri Medvedev, Président de La Fédération de Russie, Sur Les Relations Franco-Russes, à Paris”, March, 1, 2010.

⁷⁵ Dimitri Mevdev, “Conférence de Presse Conjointe de MM. Nicolas Sarkozy, Président de La République, et Dmitri Medvedev, Président de La Fédération de Russie, Sur Les Relations Franco-Russes, à Paris”, March, 1, 2010.

a positive approach on Russia. For instance, he was the only Head of State in Europe to celebrate the “democratic nature” of the 2007 Russian parliamentary elections and the first to congratulate Dmitry Medvedev on his victory the following year.⁷⁶ The French President’s pragmatic management of Georgian crisis further demonstrates France’s determination to preserve its relations with Russia, even ready to play a part in the negotiations. Although the Russo-Georgian conflict broke out in August 2008, its origins date back far earlier.

On 13 December 1991, the elected congress of the Ossetian people called for the creation of a Republic unifying the two Ossetian regions (North Ossetia, within Russian territory, and South Ossetia, under Georgian jurisdiction). More than 60% of the population supported the Republic. This claim radicalised the tension between Russia and Georgia, illustrated by the threat to attach South Ossetia to the Russian Federation, formulated by the President of the Russian Parliament. A year later, the same problem arose in the Georgian region of Abkhazia, where the people asked for independence or integration into Russia, accentuating the conflict between the two countries. A bloody war claiming more than 3,000 lives ensued between the Ossetian nationalist forces supported by the Kremlin and the regular Georgian army. The two conflicts led to a ceasefire in June 1992, dividing the territory into UN peacekeeping zones where Russian and Georgian forces were stationed, while the Ossetian nationalists managed the territory administratively.

In 2004, border incidents provoked a revolt known as the Rose Revolution, which led to the election of pro-European President Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia. The latter wanted to bring South Ossetia back into the Georgian sphere, although this idea was rejected by South Ossetians in a referendum two years later.⁷⁷ At the same time, Russia launched a naturalisation campaign, offering massive citizenship to Ossetians and Abkhazians. This method - which was not new in Russian history - was designed to maintain Russian influence in the region, which naturally upset the Georgian authorities. During these years, South Ossetia experienced many military clashes between pro-independence forces and the Georgian army albeit an agreement between the two states resulted in the closure of the last Russian military bases in Georgia in 2005.⁷⁸ In 2007, Georgia doubled its Defence budget and received military and financial aid from a number of countries. Russia and Georgia both seem to be preparing for a conflict, which

⁷⁶Arnaud Dubien, “Nicolas Sarkozy et La Russie, Ou Le Triomphe de La Realpolitik,” *Revue Internationale et Stratégique* 77, no. 1 (2010): 129.

⁷⁷ Le Monde, “En Géorgie, l’Ossétie Du Sud Vote Pour Son Indépendance”, *Le Monde*, November 12, 2006.

⁷⁸ Romain Yakemtchouk, “Nicolas Sarkozy à La Présidence de La République Française,” in *La France et La Russie. Alliances et Discordances* (Editions L’Harmattan, 2011), 229–40.

causes great concern in the international community. In April 2008, Tbilisi's authorities were irritated by Russia's strengthening of ties with South Ossetian independentists.

At the same time, Moscow did not appreciate Georgia's ambition - supported by 70% of its population ⁷⁹ - to join NATO and the European Union, feeling it as a foreign interference in Russian-speaking minorities territories and to close from its border. ⁸⁰ During the summer, the two countries accused each other of military preparations. Tensions escalated until an incident resulting in several deaths occurred on August 7, 2008. The same day, Georgia assaulted South Ossetia and within 24 hours, Russia replied by sending tanks across the Ossetian border to "*restore constitutional order and peace*", in the words of President Medvedev. Some Western commentators are denouncing a hidden Russian goal in this armed conflict. American President G.W. Bush said his concern, while the two candidates in the election - B. Obama and J. McCain - both suggested that Russia's objective was to wipe Georgia off the "energy map", thus establishing itself as the only transit territory for the hydrocarbons coming from the oil-producing countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus. ⁸¹

In a hurry, a few days later, the French President, accompanied by his Minister of Foreign Affairs Bernard Kouchner, travelled to Moscow and Georgia to negotiate de-escalation. Nicolas Sarkozy, sponsored by the European Union (EU) - for which he acted as mediator, France holding the presidency at the time - obtained, after long hours of negotiations, a 6-point peace agreement on 12 August in Tbilisi. This plan called for an immediate cessation of hostilities, the withdrawal of Georgian and Russian forces, the opening of international discussions on the status of the two regions and humanitarian aid assistance. ⁸² It made however no mention of Georgia's territorial integrity, leaving open the possibility for future negotiations on the status of the self-proclaimed republics. In the days following the conclusion of the agreement, Russia officially recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, using for instance Kosovo as an argument. This declaration was condemned by most of Western countries, including France. Embarrassed, French officials appeased the situation by agreeing that even if the Kremlin's attitude was not exemplary, it was absolutely necessary not to enter

⁷⁹ VOA, "Georgia Votes in Favor of NATO", *Voice of America - VOA News*, November 2009.

⁸⁰ George W. Bush, "President Addresses and Thanks Citizens in Tbilisi, Georgia". 2005.

⁸¹ Vicken Cheterian, "Escalade Militaire Dans Le Caucase," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June 30, 2007.

⁸² Cyrille Beyer, "2008 : La Médiation En Deux Temps Du Président Sarkozy Dans La Guerre Russo-Géorgienne", *INA*, 2022.

into a confrontation with Russia and to pursue therefore the initial strategy.⁸³ Hence, Nicolas Sarkozy played a key role in bringing a swift end to the Russo-Georgian war in 2008. In so doing, he may have achieved one of his major diplomatic successes while in office.

Often praised as a feat by French foreign ministry officials, the mediation undertaken by the Élysée on the conflict drew on the other hand criticism from other countries. The United States for example, saw in the dialogue with Moscow a real danger. Nonetheless, while these commentators consider the peace treaty to be “minimal”, its main goal of preventing the conflict from becoming entrenched has been achieved. It is worth reminding readers that Russian troops had largely crossed the borders of South Ossetia with an army at the gates of the Georgian capital. Hostilities therefore ceased immediately, and Russia promised to withdraw its troops. While the quickness of the cessation of the war is not solely due to the effectiveness of French mediation - and its ability to negotiate with Russia - the latter was however decisive in bringing the crisis to an end. Gathered in Brussels the day following the peace agreement, the European community gave its support to French diplomatic action carried by its President. The Georgian crisis has been therefore a landmark event in Franco-Russian relations, to the point where some Heads of State accused N. Sarkozy for having been too “pro-Russian”, in particular by using the Kremlin’s controversial wording regarding the protection of the Russian speakers’ interests.⁸⁴ On the other hand, during the press conference informing the world of that the resolution between the two belligerents has been reached, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili expressed his thanks sincerely to his French counterpart : *“Georgia is grateful for all your efforts, for your bold - one might say historic - intervention in these negotiations, in these talks to stop the war, the invasion, the aggression, to establish peace and try to protect human rights in this brutal conflict.”*⁸⁵

Dmitry Medvedev, meanwhile, praised the French President’s *“active participation in resolving the conflict and finding solutions at a very difficult time”*⁸⁶.

⁸³ Chris Harris, “Europe’s Forgotten War: The Georgia-Russia Conflict Explained a Decade On,” *Euronews*, August 7, 2018.

⁸⁴ Arnaud Dubien, *op.cit.*

⁸⁵ Mikheil Saakashvili, “Conférence de Presse Conjointe de MM. Nicolas Sarkozy, Président de La République, Sur Les Efforts de l’Union Européenne En Faveur de La Résolution Du Conflit Russo-Géorgien Concernant Les Régions Séparatistes de Géorgie, l’Ossétie Du Sud et l’Abkhazie, à Tbilissi”, September, 8, 2008.

⁸⁶ Dmitry Medvedev, “Conférence de Presse Conjointe de MM. Nicolas Sarkozy, Président de La République, et Jose Manuel Barroso, Président de La Commission Européenne, Sur Les Relations Euro-Russes, Notamment Concernant Le Conflit Russo-Géorgien, Les Questions de Sécurité et l’Avenir Du Système Financier International, à Nice”, November, 14, 2008.

In 2009, an independent report commissioned by the EU to shed light on the war concluded that it was Georgia which had been the “trigger” of the conflict, but Russia had also been responsible for a series of provocations leading to a disproportionate reaction.⁸⁷ Given these circumstances, Nicolas Sarkozy’s approach of diplomacy and mediation seems thus to have been quite appropriate. This crisis represents a crucial moment in the Franco-Russian relationship during his term and illustrates his will to commit rapprochement towards Russia.

2.1.2. *Boosting Cooperation*

Generally, since his election, although Franco-Russian relations have suffered certain inflexions, they have been reshaped by several bilateral initiatives taken by the French President. He met Vladimir Putin for the first time officially at the G8 summit in Heiligendamm in June 2007. At that time, France was one of the countries promoting the EU-Russia agreement on visa facilitation for Russian and European citizens. Nicolas Sarkozy said on several occasions that he would be keen to go even further by completely abolishing the visa regime, and by working harder on EU-Russia relations.⁸⁸ In 2010, President Medvedev expressed his gratitude on this visas issue, officially thanking his French counterpart.⁸⁹ This period also witnessed the strengthening of economic cooperation. French oil company *Total Energies* signed a highly ambitious deal with the Russian gas giant *Gazprom*, which already had a strong presence in France. The contract concerned a field in the Barents Sea, in the north of Russia and Finland. 2008 saw a wave of different investments by both countries; that year, for example, France became the leading foreign investor in the Tatarstan region, particularly in the Kazan and Yelabuga areas, attracting major economic groups such as *Schneider Electric*, *Air Liquide* or the hotel operator *Accor*.⁹⁰ The leaders pay numerous visits to each other during their terms of office. In 2008, Dmitry Medvedev went the small Savoy town of Evian for a summit on international security. French Prime Minister François Fillon gave a speech the following year in Yaroslavl on “*the role of the modern State in a responsible market economy*”, while his visit

⁸⁷ Olivier Corten, ““Le Rapport de La Mission d’Enquête Internationale Indépendante Sur Le Conflit En Géorgie: Quel Apport Au Jus Contra Bellum?,”” *Revue générale de droit international public*, n°1, 2010.

⁸⁸ Nicolas Sarkozy, “Entretien Dans Le Quotidien Russe ‘Rossiskaya Gazeta’, Notamment Sur Les Relations Franco-Russes, La Construction Européenne, Les Relations Avec l’OTAN et Le Nucléaire Iranien”, October, 9, 2007

⁸⁹ Dimitry Medvedev, “Conférence de Presse Conjointe de MM. Nicolas Sarkozy, Président de La République, et Dmitri Medvedev, Président de La Fédération de Russie, Sur Les Relations Franco-Russes, à Paris”, March, 1, 2010.

⁹⁰ Romain Yakemtchouk, “Nicolas Sarkozy à La Présidence de La République Française,” in *La France et La Russie. Alliances et Discordances* (Editions L’Harmattan, 2011), 229–40.

was intended to intensify bilateral economic cooperation. Fifteen cooperation documents are also signed by the two countries in the fields of energy, technology and automotive sector, and the two leaders discussed the involvement of a French electricity group in the *South Stream* gas pipeline project, which will transport Russian gas to Europe via the Black Sea. In 2009, French parliamentarians had the honour of receiving Prime Minister Vladimir Putin for the 14th Franco-Russian Mixed Commission. This working visit to Paris had been an important moment in the life of these commissions, with the presence of many French ministers (Jean-Louis Borloo, Christine Lagarde, Valérie Pécresse, Christian Estrosi, etc.).⁹¹

Finally, 2010 has been an important year for French and Russian diplomacy. This date commemorated 300 years of bilateral relations between the two countries. The initiative, entitled “The France-Russia Year”, focused on organising artistic and musical events held simultaneously in both France and Russia. To give two concrete examples, the renowned theatre company *La Comédie-Française* toured all the way to Omsk, in south Siberia, and the Parisian *Museum of the Invalides* organised a colloquium-exhibition entitled “France-Russia: three hundred years of special relations”. The event also gave many French researchers an interesting opportunity to immerse themselves in the Russian research environment.⁹² As part of his state visit to France in March, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev inaugurated the exhibition “Holy Russia” at the *Louvre Museum*. Using cultural diplomacy to celebrate Franco-Russian ties, the year 2010 also served as an instrument for boosting relations between the two countries and developing new partnerships in other sectors (space, education, sport, etc.).⁹³ With over 400 events taking place, this France-Russia year also covered other areas. Major economic events were organised, with numerous forums and bilateral meetings. At launching of the first one, the French Minister for the Economy and Finance Christine Lagarde, who was particularly involved stated : “*This year will have three objectives: to understand the future strengths of our two countries, their young people and their researchers; to revitalise our exchanges in all areas; and finally to prepare new initiatives that will further broaden the fields of dialogue and cooperation between France and Russia.*”⁹⁴

⁹¹ Romain Yakemtchouk, *op.cit.*

⁹² Sophie Kienlen, “France-Russie : Trois Cents Ans de Relations Privilégiées,” *Bulletin de l’Institut Pierre Renouvin* N° 31, no. 1 (February 1, 2010): 197–202.

⁹³ Ministère de la Culture, “Année France - Russie 2010”, January 25, 2010.

⁹⁴ Christine Lagarde, “Conférence de Presse de Lancement de l’Année France Russie Au Quai D’Orsay”, 2010.

Moreover, scientific cooperation was given prominent place, as it has historically played a central role in bilateral relations concerning many fields such as mathematics, climatology, nuclear physics, biotechnology, health and space. For instance, the Kourou space base in French Guiana developed in 2010 a new launcher, with the contribution of the Russians during the entire process. The parliamentarians of the Franco-Russian Mixed Committee have also been widely involved to help and organise this special year, which they celebrated during a special dedicated session on 7 May 2010.⁹⁵ Furthermore, regarding international affairs, a certain acceptance seemed to prevail between the two countries. France was engaging the European Union in a rapprochement with Russia, and parallelly working to convince US President Barack Obama to definitely abandon the American policy of “encirclement” promoted since G.W Bush, and to which Paris had always been strongly opposed. In addition, when France announced in March 2010 to lead an international coalition to intervene in Libya, Russia did not impose its right of veto by abstaining from the Security Council vote, although its diplomacy was reluctant and non-participant. Only later on, Russia became particularly critical.⁹⁶

2.1.3. *The Mistral Episode*

Finally, the end of Nicolas Sarkozy’s five-year term saw one last milestone in bilateral relations, with the contract signature for the sale of two advanced technology naval vessels to Russia. Despite the war in Georgia, the deal was part of the détente that Nicolas Sarkozy wanted to build with Russia. The negotiations were secretly held between Paris and Moscow, the Georgian episode being over only a year ago. The NATO partners having already expressed some dissatisfactions are likely to regard this move very negatively. Built in Saint Nazaire shipyard, the *Mistral* are multifunctional warships capable of transporting tanks and helicopters. Their construction was announced as “joint” since Russian companies were involved in production. The deal is estimated to have earned over €1 billion for France, each vessel being valued around €500 million.⁹⁷ A long-term employment dynamic was also ensured, with the aim of boosting the economy in the context of the subprime crisis that affected the entire world in that period. Denounced by several countries, including Poland, the Baltic States and Georgia

⁹⁵ Christine Lagarde, *op.cit.*

⁹⁶ Anne de Tinguy, “La Russie Face Aux Révoltes Libyenne et Syrienne,” *Presses de l’Ifpo*, January 1, 2014, 85–103.

⁹⁷ Véronique Guillermand, “La Non-Livraison de Deux Navires Mistral à La Russie a Coûté 409 Millions à La France,” *Le Figaro*, January 31, 2023.

- which feared a potential technology transfer - France tried to provide reassurance by asserting that the deal was not guaranteeing the same systems used on the original ships, which were known to be of excellent quality. Russia not having the same capacities was however gaining a huge manufacturing advantage with its reliable partner. This issue generated major controversy on both sides of the Atlantic: France, a member of NATO - which had rejoined its military integrated command structure in 2008 - was selling military ships to Russia, creating obviously a major precedent in the alliance. In addition, Paris was, at the same time, reaffirming its opposition to granting the Alliance's Membership Action Plan (MAP) to Georgia and Ukraine. On the other hand, it contributed positively to improving the political relations with Moscow. In this respect, the *Mistral* episode can be seen from another perspective suggesting a thoughtful foreign policy strategy: by selling these warships, France was integrating Russia in a concrete defence partnership, using an excellent diplomatic instrument to appease bilateral relations with Moscow, if not multilateral.⁹⁸

Several years later, the sale still caused controversy, particularly when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. Following the crisis, NATO members' criticisms of the French government - which had been growing steadily since 2009 - were only intensifying. At the time, new contracts were even planned to be signed by the new President François Hollande, who seemed at the beginning unwilling to change initial policy. Yet, the ensuing situation forced him to do so. Supported by efficient diplomatic endeavors, he managed to cancel the sales, while trying to limit a financial disaster. In fact, the negotiations for the termination of the contract could have been much more conflictual. A fairly balanced agreement was finally reached with an accommodating Russian administration, which after all, had gained to see some technical plans by its cooperation on the project without spending a single euro. Despite the French withdrawal, this military-industrial alliance has never ceased to be heavily criticised.⁹⁹

Although Franco-Russian relations went through few meanders during President Sarkozy's time in office, this period does not represent a break with Russia. From the Georgian crisis to the *Mistral* sale, the sixth President of the fifth Republic has on the contrary, worked to preserve close relations between Paris and Moscow. In the tradition of General de Gaulle's foreign policy, he aimed to renew the "privileged relationship" despite the different crises and the international context, while maintaining a free voice and room for manoeuvre. Prime

⁹⁸ Oleg Kobtzeff, "L'Affaire Des Mistral Russes," *Université Panthéon-Assas*, 2016.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*.

Minister François Fillon and his cabinet also played a decisive role in the bilateral rapprochement, as did the French business community.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Arnaud Dubien, *op.cit.*

2.2. François Hollande's Endeavors

*“France is one of the few countries that not only listens to us, but also hears us”*¹⁰¹

Vladimir Putin, 2012

*“Our relationship is longstanding, if not historic, with major ties. It is bound to be promising as soon as it involves two countries that have the vocation to influence the world's destiny”*¹⁰²

François Hollande, 2013

2.2.1. Sustained Partnership Despite Slight Changes

Despite a five-year term characterised by a certain distancing due to various international issues (cf. Syria, Crimea, etc.), François Hollande and his administration have not closed the dialogue with Russia. As a result, for this new period, Franco-Russian relations continued to be strategic for French Foreign Policy, preserving traditional features of discussion. While personal links had played in the past, the relationship with Vladimir Putin - who was back at the Kremlin in 2012 - was much less cordial compared with previous French presidents. François Hollande has been highly critical towards the Russian leader, even if he was congratulated in the end after his victory at May 2012 elections. Therefore, he grasped from the start this need of dialogue and quickly organised his first visit to Moscow with the French diplomatic corps. During this trip, he was accompanied by several business CEOs actively involved in economic relations in Russia, who were familiar with the issues at stake through their activities. This strategy of continuum was also reflected in the appointment in 2012 of a “Special Representative for Russia” by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The choice of Jean-Pierre Chevènement - who had always shown an historic approach - to take on this new role also emerges as a sign of France's pragmatic approach of the dialogue with Moscow.

¹⁰¹ Vladimir Putin, “Conférence de Presse Conjointe de MM. François Hollande, Président de La République, Sur Les Relations Franco-Russes, Le Nucléaire Iranien et Sur La Situation En Syrie”, June, 1, 2012.

¹⁰² François Hollande, “Conférence de Presse Conjointe avec Vladimir Poutine, Président de La Fédération de Russie, Sur Les Relations Franco-Russes, à Moscou”, February, 28, 2013.

The socialist ex-Minister was appreciated in Russia. In fact, he was even decorated by V. Putin in 2017 for having “*strengthened peace, friendship and mutual understanding between our two peoples*” and reappointed to his position by Emmanuel Macron.¹⁰³

It is also no coincidence that François Hollande chose Russia to launch his economic diplomacy campaign in 2013. This first visit to the Kremlin aimed to increase trade and maintain existing interests. At the time, France was Russia’s second-largest European trading partner after Germany, having considerably improved its position since 2006, in particular due to direct investments made under the two previous Presidents. Hence, despite the impression given in the press at the time, the dialogue with Moscow had never been interrupted in recent years, perhaps even intensifying slightly. Strong differences between the two countries, such as Ukraine or Syria, existed but it had never led to a total breakdown or affected the management of other issues. For instance, the Iran nuclear deal would not have been signed in July 2015 without in-depth discussions with Russian diplomats; or similarly, the *Mistral* sale annulment - mentioned in the previous section - would not have been resolved without tension and limiting costs for France. During these discussions, the Franco-Russian relationship worked perfectly and reminding other actors that agreement could be reach. Various acts of rapprochement have thus demonstrated the maintenance of this relationship despite deep divergences, and help to offset the idea of a distance, relative rather than total under the Presidency of François Hollande.¹⁰⁴

2.2.2. *The Ukrainian Crisis and the Minsk Protocol*

One of the main concerns was the management of the Ukrainian crisis, which erupted in March 2014 with the annexation of Crimea. This conflict is rooted in a series of events, including the Euromaidan followed by the Revolution of Dignity, which saw the Ukrainian people demonstrate their anger against Viktor Yanukovich’s pro-Russian government breaking with the European Union. The crisis led to the removal of the latter and the organisation of new elections, which saw the victory of one of the Revolution’s protagonist, great supporter of the protests, Petro Poroshenko. The disparity of the vote across the country confirmed however the complexity of this conflict, whose direct consequences are still being felt today. While the

¹⁰³ Le Parisien, “Jean-Pierre Chevènement Décoré Par Vladimir Poutine,” *Le Parisien*, November 4, 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Élisabeth Guigou, “Enjeux Stratégiques Pour La France et L’Europe,” *Revue Défense Nationale* N° 801, no. 6 (June 1, 2017), 13–24.

majority of commentators agree that Ukrainians have a legitimate right to join the European institutions and to look westwards rather than towards Moscow, it is fundamental to pay attention to other scholars emphasising the reality of a country sharply divided on these questions (cf. uneven geographical distribution of votes in pre-2014 elections);¹⁰⁵ as well as the weight of foreign interference in Ukrainian affairs.¹⁰⁶ On its side, France's main objective was to resolve an escalating conflict adopting the most pragmatic stance possible through negotiation pursuing the dialogue with Moscow and the strength of its line regarding NATO enlargement. During the regime crisis, the French government - along with Germany and Poland - supported Russian diplomats' proposal to persuade the two parties (Yanukovych's party and his official opponents) to agree on a coalition government, allowing time for new elections to take place before the end of the year. This proposal was a failure, as Yanukovych's opponents did not accept the negotiations and forced him to flee the country a few days later.¹⁰⁷

Besides the immediate and swift annexation of Crimea by Russian troops at the end of February, the crisis has also resulted in the backing of the separatist republics of eastern Ukraine, i.e. the Donbas region including the provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk. Like the Georgian territories mentioned in the previous section, these self-proclaimed republics are composed of a large Russian ethnic minority (around 40% in both territories) but also of a large Russian-speaking majority, with over 75% of the population whose language is Russian.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, France feels particularly responsible regarding this conflict since the country had signed the Budapest Memorandum, which in 1994 guaranteed Ukraine its territorial integrity in return for the surrender of its nuclear weapons.

French foreign policy was then marked by the Normandy Format initiative, which set up diplomatic meetings between four countries in order to negotiate an end to the war in Donbas. Under the auspices of France and Germany, the negotiations are focused on this last aspect of the conflict. During this time, François Hollande and Chancellor Angela Merkel were in direct talks with Vladimir Putin and President Poroshenko. The name "Normandy" comes from the first quadripartite meeting, which took place in Bénouville on 6 June 2014 after the Normandy landings 70th anniversary commemorations. French diplomacy found indeed the

¹⁰⁵ Kanat Makhanov, "Geography of the Presidential Elections in Ukraine," *Eurasian Research Institute*, 2020.

¹⁰⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (2014): 77–89.

¹⁰⁷ Allen C. Lynch, "Explaining the Russian war in Ukraine", University of Virginia, 2023.

¹⁰⁸ Kanat Makhanov, *op.cit.*

judicious initiative to invite them both on this occasion. The two Heads of State met for the first time since the outbreak of the Donbas war. The Normandy Format was consequently set up and used for all the following conciliation meetings to promote dialogue between the Ukrainian State, the separatist Republics and Russia. As moderators, France and Germany were looking to find an agreement that would have sought a peaceful solution to an intricate conflict. In total, the four countries met five times until 2016 before Emmanuel Macron revived the format three years later. The Minsk agreements - known as Minsk II - were signed on 11 February 2015 by the four nations at the third official meeting.¹⁰⁹ Ukraine promised in particular to introduce into its constitution a provision recognising the eastern regions of Donbas a special status, but also to implement a policy to protect Russian language. At the same time, Russia pledged to use its influence with separatists to ensure that the ceasefire remains respected and that the OSCE could move freely in the disputed zones.¹¹⁰ With this principle settled, efforts to ensure its long-term implementation have then been central to the next stage of the Normandy format initiative.

Even though the Minsk agreements have not been fully respected by both sides - Ukraine and the Russian separatists blaming on each other for the resurgence of conflict - this action has remained an unprecedented attempt by France and Germany to develop a pragmatic foreign policy initiative in the spirit of dialogue. The April 2015 Berlin meeting was dedicated in particular to this purpose. At that point, only three or four of the thirteen commitments signed in Minsk had been fulfilled. The reasons for the implementation failure are manifold, giving rise to different interpretations where each party denying its faults. The war in the Donbas will have caused more than 13,000 deaths and the double of wounded, with no real end of the fighting until the invasion of 2022.¹¹¹ Notwithstanding, the efforts made by French - and German - diplomacy between 2013 and 2016 to find a solution to the conflict are indisputable. In an interview with press in September 2015, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Laurent Fabius, reminded: *“France’s number one objective is peace and security. This is the case with Ukraine, and we have built up for this purpose the Normandy Format. Along with the Germans, we are the only ones talking to the Russians to find a solution with the Ukrainians.”*¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, “100% Diplo, Format Normandie”, 2022.

¹¹⁰ Élisabeth Guigou, *op.cit.*

¹¹¹ Courrier international, “La Trêve Mise à Mal Par Des Combats Dans Le Donbass,” *Courrier international*, February 24, 2015.

¹¹² Laurent Fabius, “Entretien de M. Laurent Fabius, Ministre Des Affaires Étrangères et Du Développement International, Sur La Situation En Syrie et En Ukraine”, *BFM TV*, September, 29, 2015.

The aim of the dialogue initiative was based on cooperation with Russia, still perceived as a major neighbor that cannot be ignored. Meanwhile, the negotiations were conducted with a firmness, in the light of fundamental principles to which France would never renounce, in the context of a strategic approach to maintaining peace in Europe. The aim of this initiative was indeed also to provide a genuine partnership with Russia at European level going beyond the mere diplomatic compromise. Through its management of the Ukrainian crisis, France had proved therefore to be a leading actor in Europe - alongside Germany - to seek a solution and try to reach a consensus on a new security pact with Russia. François Hollande stressed this idea in his 2016 speech: *“This Normandy Format is the only framework in which the Ukrainian question can be truly addressed. It was in Normandy that awareness was raised, and then in Minsk that agreements were reached with our responsibility.”*¹¹³

2.2.3. *Rapprochement Due to the Terrorism Threat*

This participation and willingness to engage in constructive dialogue also bear witness to the historical weight of Franco-Russian relations, which have been always considered essential in diplomatic approach despite various tensions. Under François Hollande, these relations were also being pursued in the fight against terrorism. In this context, Russia has not hesitated for example, to support France in its military intervention in Mali - *Operation Serval* - launched by the French President in January 2013. The two Heads of State discussed also this issue during François Hollande's first visit to Moscow the same year. France has then experienced a dark year in 2015, with waves of bloody attacks followed by the introduction a state of emergency. Vladimir Putin's immediate condolences and the presence of the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, in Paris for the solemn march for the terrorist attacks' victims demonstrate a sense of solidarity between the two peoples.¹¹⁴ This act reminded France that terrorism requires international cooperation that goes beyond political differences. In the aftermath of these attacks, a war was waged against the Islamic State (ISIS), the main terrorist group involved. François Hollande declared himself in favour of a *“single, large and*

¹¹³ François Hollande, “Déclaration à La Presse Sur Les Accords de Minsk Concernant l’Ukraine et Sur Le Conflit Syrien, à Berlin”, October, 20, 2016.

¹¹⁴ Isabelle Facon, “La Relation France-Russie à L’épreuve”, *Annuaire Français de Relations Internationales*, Vol. 15, Université Panthéon Assas, July 7, 2015.

international coalition” including Russia, hoping that Moscow would “*join forces to achieve a result that for the moment is still too far off.*”¹¹⁵

The differences between the two States, and more generally between Russia and Western countries, will in fact prevent perfect cooperation in this fight. A shining example of that could be the distinct positions on the Syrian dossier, to which the second chapter will develop in greater detail. Despite these obstacles, it is however important to highlight the readiness to engage in challenging dialogue on an issue on which the intelligence services of the two countries had already started to work together ten years earlier.¹¹⁶

During François Hollande’s five-year presidency, Franco-Russian relations have steadily developed, despite more tensions than under previous presidents. Dialogue with Vladimir Putin continued, even if it was not the warmest. France’s position during this period has been neatly summarised by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, L. Fabius, who skillfully asserted that “*both realism and France’s own best interests preclude a systematic opposition to Russia and an attitude of anti-Russianism, without though exonerating it from all criticism*”.

Thus, even when France becomes firmer in its dialogue with Moscow, this firmness never leads to a total breakdown. Despite various upheavals, contacts at different levels in regular and the special communication lines were constantly maintained. In 2017, the Kremlin saw in Emmanuel Macron’s election an opportunity to not only pursue these aspects, but to go further overstepping a certain stagnation and returning to a friendlier entente and understanding that used to prevailed before.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ François Hollande, “Déclaration Devant Le Parlement Réuni En Congrès à La Suite Des Attaques Terroristes Perpétrées à Paris et En Seine-Saint-Denis, Versailles”, November, 16, 2015.

¹¹⁶ Anne de Tinguy, “Russie : La France En Quête de Paradigme,” *Les Dossiers Du CERI*, 2017.

¹¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

2.3. Emmanuel Macron and the Final Attempt

*“No major issue can be addressed today without considering Russia. The history of our relations has shown it. And the most important thing in this history, which is now three centuries old, is the constant dialogue between France and Russia, which has never ceased.”*¹¹⁸

Emmanuel Macron, 2017

*“France is our traditional partner, and we cherish the mutually advantageous relationship with this country, which we aim to keep growing. We are engaged in intense political dialogue with President Macron, and I would like to thank him for his open-mindedness.”*¹¹⁹

Vladimir Putin, 2018

2.3.1. Diplomatic Overtures at the Start of the Term

In preamble, it is interesting to observe that in 2017, the Russian question was very present in French society, particularly in the presidential election debates. For instance, three of the five main candidates were showing a proximity towards Moscow. The right-wing candidate François Fillon advocated for example the re-establishment of *“relations of trust with Russia, which must return to being a major partner”*. The latter claimed also sanctions’ lifting at the European level. More significantly, the far-right leader Marine Le Pen was received by Vladimir Putin at the Kremlin two months before the elections, declaring that he was a *“decisive element in the balance of power”*. The question of Russia took on such importance also because it resonated at the time with the French people’s main concerns (economy, security, fight against terrorism). This may as well partly explain why 64% of French people were in favour of the delivery of the *Mistral* ships in January 2015, according to the French Institute of Public Opinion (IFOP). For a large part of the population, the question of Russia is linked to

¹¹⁸ Emmanuel Macron, “Conférence de Presse Conjointe avec Vladimir Poutine, Président de La Fédération de Russie, Sur Les Relations Franco-Russes et Sur Les Conflits En Syrie et En Ukraine, à Versailles”, May, 29, 2017.

¹¹⁹ Vladimir Putin, “Conférence de Presse Conjointe avec le Président de La République, Emmanuel Macron à Saint-Pétersbourg”, May, 24, 2018.

independence and sovereignty, particularly about the United States and the EU.¹²⁰ Even using less rhetoric, Emmanuel Macron was aware of these facts. Adopting the “demanding dialogue” of his predecessor, he marked his five first years in office by a resolute attempt for rapprochement with Moscow. For instance, Jean Pierre Chevènement, who believed that “there is no independence for France without a strong Russia”, kept his position as Special Representative for Russia.¹²¹

From the very beginning of his term, Emmanuel Macron sought to bring reconciliation back by receiving the Russian President with the utmost style at the Château de Versailles on 29 May 2017, just 15 days after his election. For their first meeting, Vladimir Putin was in fact welcomed with military honours, and French diplomacy pulled out all the stops for the organisation of his State visit. The choice of venue was not without significance: the Château de Versailles had not often been chosen to receive a Russian President - the last time, 25 years earlier, being Boris Yeltsin and François Mitterrand meeting - and thus confirmed the very regal stance adopted by the French President. This historic choice was also linked to the inauguration of the major exhibition “Peter the Great, a Tsar in France, 1717”, organised to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the Tsar’s visit to Paris. The symbol was evidently a perfect opportunity to meet President Putin in this almost fraternal atmosphere, where the message of esteem at least certainly resonated.¹²²

Although bilateral relations were characterised by some difficulties, the two leaders seem to share the desire of a constructive evolution of their political relations, and both believed in developing their personal ties to move diplomacy forward. Through this meeting, they had the will to demonstrate the spirit of common work in all possible areas. The two leaders disagreed on many issues, but all aspects were addressed with great attention on both sides. On the Ukrainian conflict, for example, the desire to renew the Normandy Format to put French diplomacy forward was visible on Macron’s part, whereas from the Russian side appeared the need of breakout with international isolation and sanctions. President Putin insisted on the fight against terrorism, where he emphasised the necessity of coordinating actions between France and Russia within a joint task force to address this widespread threat.

¹²⁰ Anne de Tinguy, *op.cit.*

¹²¹ Anne de Tinguy, *op.cit.*

¹²² Marc Semo, “Macron Reçoit Poutine à Versailles, Dans Un Contexte Lourd de Tensions,” *Le Monde*, May 22, 2017.

The Versailles meeting has also been the occasion for the two Presidents to create a Franco-Russian forum, known as the “Trianon Dialogue”. This diplomatic initiative marked an interaction framework aiming to promote trust and mutual understanding between French and Russian peoples, especially through civil society. The network was meant to be a helpful platform for strengthening direct contacts through non-governmental organisations, with a particular focus on young people, professional communities, businesses, scientific and academic circles, and also cultural and educational structures. Meetings and round-table discussions had brought together experts from different backgrounds to establish constructive exchanges. In a reference to the palace in which the exhibition took place, visited by the two Heads of State on the same day, the “Trianon dialogue” was to intensify bilateral relations, with a determination to lay new foundations in the early stages of Emmanuel Macron’s first term. Versailles was therefore a decisive moment confirming a new page in the warming of Franco-Russian relations.¹²³

In July 2017, V. Putin and E. Macron met again at the G20 summit in Hamburg, where they confirmed their desire to move towards restoring cooperation within the Normandy Format. In 2017, Franco-Russian relations largely regained their full pace of interaction on economic and trade issues, illustrated by two successful meetings of the Franco-Russian Council on Economic, Financial, Industrial and Commercial Issues (CEFIC). The rationale of mutual economic interest helped to set bilateral relations up on a truly beneficial basis. The complex international situation didn’t affect the implementation of joint initiatives in many sectors. Scientific and technical links were still holding the traditional importance in the structure of these economic relations. One year after Versailles, Vladimir Putin welcomed Emmanuel Macron on this topic when he invited him to the St Petersburg economic forum (SPIEF), one of the major events for the Russian business community. The French President went to Russia for the first time with around fifty business leaders. Thanks to their help, he could sign a large number of contracts during the official visit which provided therefore the opportunity to pursue economic cooperation between the two countries.

Notwithstanding the sanctions and the political context, French companies operating in Russia still had 550 subsidiaries present in the country, proving confidence for the future of the relationship. In 2018, 35 of the 40 companies forming the CAC-40 were present in Russia, as

¹²³ Emmanuel Macron and Vladimir Putin, “Conférence de Presse Conjointe Sur Les Relations Franco-Russes et Sur Les Conflits En Syrie et En Ukraine, à Versailles”, May, 29, 2017.

well as many Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). None of these businesses had left since the Ukrainian crisis of 2014. On the contrary, since this period, France became the leading foreign investor in Russia, with more than 1,200 French companies' production capacity linked to the Russian market. Operating in a wide range of sectors, French firms were particularly active in the agri-food, financial-banking, retail, energy and automotive industries. In addition, with 170,000 employees, they were the leading foreign employer in Russia, and France was also the European country with the largest share of start-ups.¹²⁴

While international affairs such as Syria may divide them, French and Russian diplomats emphasised the issues that bring them closer together. Those features included for example, the denuclearisation of North Korea and Iran, or the value attached to the Minsk agreements seen as the only solution for ending the conflict in Ukraine. In this respect, 2018 witnessed the resumption of the Normandy Format after a hiatus of many months, with the meeting of the four nations' political advisers in Paris in May. While Vladimir Putin repeatedly thanked France for its *"ongoing efforts to resolve this conflict"*, Emmanuel Macron reiterated the importance of pursuing diplomatic endeavors on this issue: *"The peaceful resolution of the crisis in Donbas is a key factor for the return to an appeased relationship between Europe and Russia, it is in all our interests to do so. The solution of the Minsk agreements is very concrete, and it is the only one possible"*¹²⁵

Cultural cooperation has also been developed under Emmanuel Macron's presidency, with the organisation of numerous bilateral events. They have included several exhibitions held in France and Russia, as well as cross-projects such as the "The Year of Russian and French Languages and Literature" in 2018 or the "The Year of Franco-Russian Decentralised Cooperation" in 2021, which consisted of developing territorial connections through twinnings and events of all types organised by both sides.¹²⁶ During his Saint Peterburg's visit, the French President has even been able to raise the subject of human rights, meeting different representatives of Russian civil society. Finally, 2018 saw the two Parliaments working intensely, with two new common sessions. The parliamentary dialogue even produced a joint report co-signed by the Foreign Affairs Committees Chairmen of both countries - Konstantin

¹²⁴ Konstantin Kossatchev and Christian Cambon, *op.cit.*

¹²⁵ Emmanuel Macron, "Conférence de Presse Conjointe avec Vladimir Poutine à Saint-Pétersbourg", May, 24, 2018.

¹²⁶ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, "Année de La Coopération Décentralisée Franco-Russe", 2021.

Kosachev for the Russian Duma and Christian Cambon for the French Senate. This deep work had necessarily contributed to the restoration of confidence between France and Russia, being totally in line with the dynamic introduced by Emmanuel Macron and Vladimir Putin a year earlier.¹²⁷

2.3.2. *Key Achievements of 2019*

The dialogue continued the following year with another highly symbolic meeting. In August, President Macron received in August 2019 his Russian counterpart at the Fort de Brégançon, the French Presidents' holiday residence. One week before holding the G7 summit - from which Russia has been excluded - French diplomacy was attempting once again to engage closer ties with a country considered as a friend and partner. The French Head of State spoke to his mind, showing a clear intention to strive for entente in the interests of peace: "*I know one other thing: Russia is European, very deeply, and we believe in this Europe that stretches from Lisbon to Vladivostok.*"¹²⁸

Inspired by General de Gaulle's famous quote, "*Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals*", President Macron intends to act as the mediator of rapprochement, putting himself at the centre of the international stage and the leader of the Europeans. According to French Foreign Policy, rapprochement strategy is still essential at this time given the disorder facing the world, but also due to American unilateralism. For instance, several stances were seen as mistakes among which "bludgeoning" Russia with waves of sanctions since the Ukrainian crisis outbreak or being too "Atlanticist" by allowing NATO to expand. The Director of the Franco-Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry Pavel Chinsky, recalled the opinion already shared by the President in 2016, when he was Minister of Economy: "*Emmanuel Macron had clearly expressed his view on the ineffectiveness of sanctions against Russia, hoping for a return to normality.*"¹²⁹

¹²⁷ J Konstantin Kossatchev and Christian Cambon, *op.cit.*

¹²⁸ Emmanuel Macron, "Déclaration Conjointe avec Vladimir Poutine, Président de La Fédération de Russie", August, 20, 2019.

¹²⁹ Piotr Smolar, "La Campagne Russe d'Emmanuel Macron : Retour Sur Le Pari Diplomatique Le plus Incertain Du Quinquennat," *Le Monde*, February 14, 2020.

In the same line three years later, the President intended to revive the architecture of European security through a balance restoration in EU-Russia relations. This visit to the south of France had this goal in an atmosphere relaxed, despite few cutting remarks on sensitive topics (Syria, Human Rights, etc.). On this occasion, Vladimir Putin personally expressed his gratitude to the French President for having defended few months earlier Russia's total reintegration to the Council of Europe. In fact, in May 2019, E. Macron supported the lifting of the sanctions imposed on Russia since 2014 despite numerous criticisms, and refused certain countries' request to see Russia definitely excluded: "*The Council of Europe needs Russia, just as Russia and the Russians need the Council of Europe; this means that its rights as a member state needs to be respected but also that Russia must fulfil its obligations towards the institution*".¹³⁰

At the Council's 70th anniversary, the French President cleverly borrowed Michail Gorbachev's expression, proclaiming that the institution's primary vocation was to be "*the common European home*". Under this impetus, the Council of Europe became the first international organisation to officially withdraw its sanctions against Russia. During the Russian delegation's first session after its come back, Emmanuel Macron expressed his satisfaction in front of all the Parliamentary Assembly, stressing that the Russian people identifies with "*European humanism*" since "*Russia's geography, history and culture are fundamentally European.*"¹³¹

In the wake of Brégançon, the French Ministries of Armed Forces and Foreign Affairs were tasked to draft a strategy setting out Emmanuel Macron's desire to further engage relations with Russia. Diplomat Pierre Vimont was overseeing the discussions, with Kremlin diplomatic adviser Yuri Ushakov as his point of contact. The two state agents had also to deal with the emotions aroused in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and the doubts concerning Germany. The Brégançon meeting had indeed not been preceded by any consultation with EU partners, some of them manifesting security concerns always more accurately. Consequently, during the August G7 summit in Biarritz, the European countries massively opposed the idea of the re-inclusion of Russia to the group in a near future, albeit Donald Trump's US had also suggested it.

¹³⁰ Emmanuel Macron, "Macron Veut Que La Russie Reste Membre Du Conseil de L'Europe", *AFP*, May 6, 2019.

¹³¹ Emmanuel Macron, "Discours Au Conseil de L'Europe À Strasbourg", October, 1, 2019.

In 2019, the French President will also reintroduce the Normandy Format meetings, which had been abandoned since 2016. Under his initiative, a total of three meetings - including two in Paris - took place until the last one, only twelve days before the Russian offensive in Ukraine. On this occasion, the four Heads of State reaffirmed that the Minsk agreements were the unique working basis for any discussion. They also expressed their unconditional support for the ceasefire and expected the reunion to reach an agreement on the status of Donbas. Franco-German diplomatic endeavors prove that the will to find a de-escalation path with Russia was hoped and sought until the outbreak of the war. On a related note, it is worth mentioning the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's presence at the November 2019 Paris Peace Forum. After the event, he said he was "*very grateful*" for Paris' invitation, which "*enabled us to continue our negotiations, which were a continuation of our two Presidents meetings*".¹³²

Emmanuel Macron's first term has been marked by a clear desire for rapprochement with Russia, albeit without succeeding perfectly, especially for harmonizing his foreign policy towards other international actors. French diplomacy - even not internally in total accordance - worked hard trying to reach consensus between countries, in defiance of the risk of rekindling European dissensions. In many areas, like culture or the economy, France has renewed its efforts to promote solid and positive relations. The Minister of Economy, Bruno Le Maire, visited Russia three times during this period. This stance was confirmed in May 2020 when E. Macron was supposed to attend the Second World War commemoration ceremonies in Moscow's Red Square, after Putin's invitation. The Covid-19 epidemic put finally an end to this trip, first postponed, then cancelled. If the French President had travelled to take part in this event - fifteen years after a similar trip by one of his predecessors - his approach to Russia might have been interpreted somehow as a *Chiracisation*.

2.3.3. *Ultimate Efforts up to 2022*

In his first term, Emmanuel Macron's willingness to dialogue has clearly been demonstrated, as it had been in the past at different level for François Hollande, Nicolas Sarkozy and Jacques Chirac. Several initiatives have been taken with the aim of surprising Moscow with a form of bold overture. Russia's former ambassador to France, Alexander K. Orlov - who was

¹³² Sergey Lavrov, "Intervention du Ministre des Affaires Étrangères au Forum de Paris sur la Paix", *Ambassade de la Fédération de Russie en France*, November 2019.

appointed in 2017, Secretary General of the Trianon Dialogue - even expressed his satisfaction in seeing the French President following De Gaulle-Mitterrand's tradition to refuse the sacrifice of a long history in order to safeguard Franco-Russian relations: "*Macron is the only Head of state in whom Vladimir Putin has a certain degree of confidence*"¹³³

While Europe has been divided over its approach and attitude towards President Putin, Emmanuel Macron was indeed highly committed to maintain the historical approach for the management of Franco-Russian dialogue. To add its modern touch, he described it as "strategic autonomy" and puts it on the Foreign Policy agenda, albeit a part of French diplomacy is not without criticisms. This strategy also echoes in the French President's doubts regarding the concrete effectiveness of NATO and its long-term value. In a November 2019 press interview, he even affirmed the irrelevance of the Atlantic organisation: "*what we are currently experiencing is the brain death of NATO*".¹³⁴

The confession outraged several NATO's allies, and the French President was for that reason harshly criticised. This kind of statement contributed in effect to a climate of reaching out to Russia with the aim of restoring durable peace. This diplomatic approach was also embodied by the development of personal relations between the two leaders until their breakthrough moment. By travelling repeatedly to Russia until the very last moment, France maintained the conversation and its relationship with V. Putin. Up to Ukraine invasion in February 2022, Paris aimed to focus on de-escalation by bringing Europe back into the negotiating game. The determination of E. Macron's diplomatic approach in this strategy is further illustrated by his refusal to alter his stance, even when over 100,000 Russian soldiers were massed on the Ukrainian border. Only 17 days before the war, he even risked a last chance meeting by travelling to Moscow on 7 February 2022, where he declared: "*We are aware of the seriousness of the situation today and of the imperative necessity, in the interests of all, to find a path to preserve peace and stability in Europe. And I believe that there is still time. The historic and strategic dialogue that we have built together over the last few years can help*".¹³⁵

¹³³ Ariane Chemin and Philippe Ricard, "Guerre En Ukraine : Le Cavalier Seul Diplomatique d'Emmanuel Macron," *Le Monde*, December 12, 2022.

¹³⁴ The Economist, "Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead" . *The Economist*, November 7, 2019.

¹³⁵ Emmanuel Macron, "Conférence de Presse avec Vladimir Poutine", February 8, 2022.

Vladimir Putin concluded the press conference at the same meeting by sincerely expressing his thanks to “*France and its President for their efforts to resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine, and his visit which symbolised it.*”¹³⁶

The French President was the penultimate Western Head of State to visit Russia for a final confrontation. The exchange between the two leaders was marked with a lively discussion albeit the moment was also characterised by a certain distance, which had been portrayed in the very long table where the two men were sitting in a Kremlin room. This picture is likely to be remembered for a very long time in the history of international relations.¹³⁷

Finally, even France’s handling of the crisis after the invasion has been perceived by some of its European allies as too complacent towards Russia. Until September 2022, Emmanuel Macron didn’t let up his efforts to find a solution to the conflict, staying in contact with Vladimir Putin. In seven months, it has been said that the two Heads of State had stayed on the phone for more than one hundred hours. During the first year of fighting, while Ukrainian soldiers had showed great resistance thwarting Russian offensive, the French President declared twice - in a speech to the European Parliament and later in the press - that “*Russia should not be humiliated*”.

These controversial statements provoked fierce reactions from Eastern Europe countries, first and foremost Ukraine, whose Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba, had brutal words for the French leader. French diplomatic’s objective of positioning Europe as a mediator in finding a solution to the conflict - at the expense of Turkey or others – had clearly not been interpreted in the same way. If the idea was to think about the post-war phase and transition, the foreign policy results have not been very apparent and the obstinate strategy of reaching Moscow out was even less appreciated.¹³⁸ Furthermore, by reacting slower and delivering less weapons to Ukraine at the beginning of the war – particularly due to a lack of stocks - France may have also given Kiev and its allies the impression of being less inclined in choosing a side, in an attempt to reduce tensions. Indeed, unlike London, Warsaw and those President Macron had called “warmongers” just few months earlier, France adopted a more cautious stance. The

¹³⁶ Vladimir Putin, “Conférence de Presse avec Emmanuel Macron”, February 8, 2022.

¹³⁷ Sonia Devillers, “Le Dessous Des Images,” *Arte*, 2025.

¹³⁸ James Crisp, “Emmanuel Macron’s Diplomacy with Vladimir Putin Is a High-Wire Act but Could Pay Dividends in French Elections,” *The Telegraph*, February 7, 2022.

impotence of these initiatives and the weakening of France's influence led undoubtedly to the 2023 shift in the Foreign Policy approach of Russia. The complete breakdown in Franco-Russian relations occurred in this context, with a level of dissension if not unprecedented, at least very long-standing. The second chapter will come back to this point.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Eva Hartog, "Putin Says Macron Stopped Calling Him," *Politico Europe*, December 14, 2023.

3. Franco-Russian Relations Within the European Context

3.1. Paris - Berlin - Moscow

*“With France and Germany, we are linked by long-term bonds of friendship in the history of our countries. They are our strategic partners, and we cherish our relationship with both. It is no coincidence that I have travelled to Berlin and Paris on the same day”*¹⁴⁰

Vladimir Putin, 2012

*“Despite our deep disagreements, we must maintain a dialogue with Russia, which is our neighbor on European soil. It’s part of our diplomatic duty, and that’s why we decided jointly to do it under the aegis of the Normandy Format”*¹⁴¹

Angela Merkel, 2021

3.1.1. Historical Triangle

If the relation between France and Russia is considered as privileged, the latter enjoyed a similarly special relationship with Germany. Historically, the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) had a great impact, but also longstanding partnerships have lasted through the ages. On the other hand, neighbors but long-time enemies, France and Germany have worked hard to seek a long-term reconciliation, especially thanks to the European project of building and integration. In many areas then, the two EU leader countries share common political objectives, and foreign policy is no exception, indeed, the two countries’ diplomacy frequently evolved in tandem when facing international crises. While some scholars often refer the duo as a “couple”, the Franco-German entente has concretely resulted in common approaches leading to a single and powerful stance on the international scene. The strategy of dialogue with Russia is an excellent example of such initiatives. The positions and the methods employed by Paris and Berlin have almost always been aligned since the 2000s, except the very recent break in 2023.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Vladimir Putin, “Conférence de Presse Conjointe avec François Hollande, Président de La République Sur Les Relations Franco-Russes, Le Nucléaire Iranien et Sur La Situation En Syrie”, June, 1, 2012.

¹⁴¹ Angela Merkel, “Conférence de Presse Conjointe Du Président Emmanuel Macron et de La Chancelière Angela Merkel à l’Issue Du Conseil Franco-Allemand de Défense et de Sécurité”, February, 5, 2021.

¹⁴² Isabelle Facon, *op.cit.*

After the Second World War, France took a certain time to draw closer to the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), sharing with Russia a concern over the potential rearmament of its previous enemy. However, de Gaulle's comeback in 1958 marked the beginning of great relations between Paris and Berlin. The French President met K. Adenauer on several occasions, like in 1962 in Reims. The dialogue gradually intensified, gaining momentum with the 1975 Valéry Giscard d'Estaing - Helmut Schmidt rapprochement, driving numerous initiatives for the building of the political integration of Europe. The two men got on very well and often shared the same foreign policy of détente towards Russia. Their 1981's meeting was followed two months later by an important bilateral agreement signed with L. Brezhnev in the city of Bonn, which embodied a Soviet leader's first official visit to West Germany.

After the USSR's collapse, the reconciliation progressed further. In 1996, the Russian Federation joined the Council of Europe after a decision of its Parliamentary Assembly, under Franco-German initiative. Both countries believed that the changing regime provided an impulse to reform Russia. One year later, France and Germany united their voices in supporting the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act. In 1998, Boris Yeltsin gathered Jacques Chirac and Helmut Kohl in Moscow to launch a three-way cooperation project. Paris, Berlin and Moscow, forming what some scholars used to call the "Yekaterinburg Triangle", agreed that they would work together to help stabilise post-Cold War relations, giving Europe a central voice in the emerging multipolar world.¹⁴³ This collaboration culminated with Jacques Chirac, Gerhard Schröder, and Vladimir Putin's triumvirate. The three Heads of State were indeed very close, cultivating excellent relations. Even if they did certainly have different perspectives with national interests leading to single interpretations, the three leaders respected and listened to each other. Eventually, it even happened to see them adopting the same conclusions on controversial issues.

3.1.2. *Political Momentum*

The friendship between the leaders crystallised in fact during the outbreak of the Iraq war, with all three countries refusing to support the American intervention. On 10 February 2003, a few days before the UNSC meeting, Russia, France and Germany issued a joint communiqué stating that there was "*still an alternative to war*", preventing it from being

¹⁴³ Jean-Christophe Romer, *op.cit.*

endorsed by UN approval. Henceforth, even if it was not immediately obvious for several reasons, the triple alliance became official.¹⁴⁴ Through their commitment to the side of peace, which is pushing for peaceful disarmament in this diplomatic battle, Paris and Berlin were now seeing Moscow as an essential ally. On the other hand, Russia considered both as optimal and weighty support, unlike almost all European countries supporting the United States in its war. The trio has been therefore at the forefront of the US-UK military intervention's rejection, seeking to adjust their strategy after the war.¹⁴⁵ The will to encourage the emergence of a multipolar world was clear from their alliance. The exact opposite was in fact advocated by George Bush's United States promoting a unipolar world based on the "democratic values of the West". Illustrated by their St Petersburg's meeting in April 2003 - although President Chirac was invited at the last minute - the France-Germany - Russia coalition manifested its stance during an international conference on law and security. The same year, they also negotiated the creation of a common economic space (CES) aimed at linking Russia to the EU, although Eastern European countries were firmly against this idea. For several reasons, the practical implementation of this project will never be achieved.¹⁴⁶

In addition to the G8 summits' meetings, the Heads of State also met in tripartite contexts. In 2004, Vladimir Putin welcomed his two counterparts to the seaside town of Sochi for an informal summit. The French and German leaders had both been to Moscow a few months earlier to meet President Putin after his March re-election. They intended therefore to continue their regular exchanges with him. During the meeting J. Chirac made any doubt on his vision of Europe and Russia's relationship: *"Our conviction, is that strengthening the ties between the European Union and Russia is in the very nature of the necessary evolution towards a calm, peaceful and democratic world"*.¹⁴⁷ A few minutes later, G. Schröder did not contradict him: *"Peace and progress in Europe can only be achieved if this European Union enlarges, entering into a strategic partnership with Russia"*.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Claire Demesmay, "France-Allemagne-Russie : Retour Sur Une Alliance Atypique," *Fondation Robert Schuman*, May 19, 2003.

¹⁴⁵ Jean-Christophe Romer, *op.cit.*

¹⁴⁶ Jacques Chirac, Vladimir Poutine and Gerhard Schroeder, "Conférence de presse conjointe sur le rôle de l'ONU dans la reconstruction de l'Irak, l'aide humanitaire aux Irakiens et la coopération politique entre la France, l'Allemagne et la Russie, Saint-Pétersbourg", April, 11, 2003.

¹⁴⁷ Jacques Chirac, Vladimir Poutine and Gerhard Schroeder, "Conférence de Presse Conjointe Sur La Prise En Otage de Deux Journalistes Français En Irak, l'Élection Présidentielle En Tchétchénie, Le Risque de Développement d'Armes Nucléaires En Iran et La Coopération Entre l'UE et La Russie, Sotchi", August, 31, 2004.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibidem.*

These words were powerful and symbolised the Franco-German political will to forge closer ties in a long-term strategy with Russia. In 2005, it was this time Jacques Chirac who received his two counterparts to the Élysée Palace to “*strengthen the bonds between Europe and Russia*”. Several issues were discussed, including the fight against terrorism, Iran’s nuclear programme and the Lebanon crisis, to which the three countries aligned once again, calling for the Syrian forces’ withdrawal and the formation of a new government. The summit was intended to bring Euro-Russian relations in greater harmony by ironing out certain contradictions and allowing dialogue to produce further results on the relations with the Kremlin.¹⁴⁹ In total, more than five meetings uniting the block France-Russia-Germany were held during this period. Even after their respective terms in office, Gerhard Schröder and Jacques Chirac maintained links with the Russian President, as witnessed by their September 2007 meetings in Russia when they were both no longer in power. Ultimately, the Ex German-leader also attended with V. Putin, President Jacques Chirac’s funeral in 2019, in Paris.

Economic and energy policies have also contributed significantly to this threefold relationship. In these areas, Russia has tended to favour links with France and Germany. In the Soviet - then Russian - diplomatic tradition, great emphasis has always been attached to bilateralism with these two states in terms of economic cooperation. For instance, the *North Stream* gas pipeline project, connecting Germany and Russia via the Baltic Sea, was being negotiated at this time. After a six years intense work for construction, it was inaugurated in 2011, in presence of Dmitry Medvedev, Angela Merkel and French Prime Minister François Fillon. This key event illustrates therefore the continuity of the Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis which took further importance under Nicolas Sarkozy. As an aside, the latter had been fully supported by Germany in its negotiations when France put a term to the 2008 war in Georgia. The two Heads of State were indeed talking to each other almost every day during this period of Caucasian tensions.

In 2013, although Germany was ahead with Italy, France was Russia’s third European supplier and Russia was also in the top three of their respective markets.¹⁵⁰ Later with François Hollande, the Normandy Format perfectly reflects the Franco-German entente on Foreign Policy adopted towards Russia. Paris and Berlin were therefore both Minsk Protocol’s guarantors with Minsk II agreement on Donbas. In this respect, the German Foreign Minister

¹⁴⁹ Le Monde, “Jacques Chirac a Reçu MM. Poutine, Schröder et Zapatero,” *Le Monde*, March 18, 2005.

¹⁵⁰ Isabelle Facon, *op.cit.*

Frank-Walter Steinmeier - at the time in office - gave his name to “The Steinmeier Formula” which became the peremptory interpretation of the agreement’s critical points approved by all the parties.¹⁵¹ In 2018, a week before receiving President Macron in Saint Petersburg, the Russian President met with Chancellor Angela Merkel in Sochi to deal on Ukraine. When the talks resumed after three years of stagnation, Vladimir Putin addressed his heartfelt thanks to both Heads of State at 2019 Paris meeting: *“I think our work was very useful. President Macron and Chancellor Merkel’s initiative attaches great importance to issues that do not fall under their direct responsibilities. We thank them for deploying so much effort to reach a definitive settlement.”*¹⁵²

Angela Merkel and later Olaf Scholz have been in permanent contact with Emmanuel Macron on this matter. Initially, the Normandy Format had proved a success in bringing Russian and Ukrainian leaders to the table, until the very last meeting in 2022 where peace was narrowly missed out. The war in Donbas got finally bogged down despite the Paris and Berlin mediation between Kiev and the pro-Russian separatists. Notwithstanding the undeniable final failure of this major initiative, Germany and France have shown their determination to resolve the conflict and restore peace in Europe. These diplomatic endeavors have always been hailed by Ukraine and Russia, albeit the latter disparaged them after subsequent controversial declarations. In any case, even if Washington has never supported this strategy, the Franco-German alliance has been able to keep its objective until the last minute, trying to manage its Foreign Policy autonomously. The two European leaders never sought to exclude the Americans from the negotiations, but did not hesitate to distance themselves if the United States weren’t on the same page. The NATO enlargement question provides in this regard another striking example.

3.1.3. Common Positions on NATO

In 2002, France and Germany jointly backed the creation of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) to strengthen Russia’s ties with the institution. Both countries also supported the various waves of enlargement that the latter witnessed during G.W Bush’s period - between 1999 and 2004 - involving ten soviet ex-satellite states. On the other hand, Paris and Berlin systemically opposed expanding the alliance too far beyond the limits of Western Europe, as the US had on the contrary always sponsored. At the 2006 Riga summit, Jacques Chirac prevented any moves

¹⁵¹ Federal Foreign Office, “For as long as it takes: Germany’s support for Ukraine”, *Auswärtiges AMT*, 2019.

¹⁵² Vladimir Putin, “Sommet de Paris en format Normandie”, Élysée, December 9, 2019.

in this direction: “*There has never been any question of extending NATO to Asia, nor anywhere else. NATO can only function properly as a military defense structure between the United States, Canada and Europe.*”¹⁵³

Angela Merkel had the same stance, aligning with this position. Consequently, in 2008, France and Germany vetoed Georgia and Ukraine’s applications, rejecting the action plan granting them membership. Under American pressure, they were however compelled - albeit not sharing the reasons - to agree the signing of a document proclaiming the eventual membership of these two countries, at the end of 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest. This reticence was seen by the Russian side as pragmatic, helping to foster Franco-German relations with Moscow. In fact, these stances probably facilitated President Sarkozy’s mediation and his credibility to influence Russian diplomacy for ending the Georgian war, that same year.¹⁵⁴ Paris and Berlin have therefore always been very clear in their efforts to curb the prospective ex-Soviet republics’ accession to the Alliance, considering that it would constitute a risk for European security.

The argument was partly based on the evidence that history and past traumas had made Moscow really sensitive on the issue, confirmed by numerous and recurrent warnings from Russian officials. This acknowledgment of Russian rationale partly reflects the existence of an international relations’ realist tradition within French and German elites, understanding the concept of respect for particular zones of influence. The idea that Russia may consider having interests to defend in its immediate neighbourhood did not necessarily shocked French and German diplomats, whereas it was unacceptable in the eyes of other Western countries (especially the US and Central Europe countries). The history of NATO was founded on the Soviet threat in the particular context of the Cold War, which explains why for some scholars, there was no point in enlarging the military alliance after the USSR’s collapse. On the contrary, such an expansion was considered being potentially detrimental, if not a factor of division rather than peace.

This Franco-German approach is confirmed by Vladimir Putin’s assessment of Paris and Berlin in his pre-election Foreign Policy manifesto, published in early 2012, in which he presented the

¹⁵³ Jacques Chirac, “Conférence de Presse Sur Les Opérations de l’OTAN En Afghanistan, Son Élargissement, Ses Partenariats, et Sur La Situation Au Liban, à Riga ”, November 29, 2006.

¹⁵⁴ Jenny Raflik-Grenouilleau, “La France Face Aux Élargissements de l’OTAN Depuis Les Années 1990,” *HAL Open Science*, 2021.

latters as driving forces for the vitality of the European project and, consequently, for Russia's anchorage in Europe.¹⁵⁵ These security issues' convergence in Europe took place in a context where multiple diplomatic lines were shared traditionally by the three governments, Moscow seeking to reach European countries "emancipation" from the United States. Indeed, even if their aim has never been confrontation, Paris and Berlin were not always in line with Washington or European allies -especially in the East - on the way of handling relations with Russia. Various German and French leaders saw this Foreign Policy as an opportunity to enhance Europe's autonomy in matters of defence, mirroring the historical Gaullist line whereby a strong and peaceful bond with Russia was a prerequisite for continental independence of Europe.¹⁵⁶

Additionally, France and Germany have been active promoters of the cooperation areas structuring the EU-Russia relationship. Both attempted many endeavors to integrate Russia to European security initiatives. In 2008, for example, the two countries campaigned to involve Russian armed forces in the European Union Military Operation (EUFOR), in Chad and Central African Republic. During the same period, Russia's position vis-à-vis the European institutions gradually improved. Russia has indeed learnt over time to manoeuvre with the EU, particularly on trade negotiations, security and immigration matters. The French and Germans had high expectations of Russia, which they believed was poorly understood by other Westerners. In this regard, Moscow would serve as a counterbalance to the American hegemony. By maintaining quality relations with Russia, the Western Europe could retain the capacity to suggest solutions to the crises affecting European security. At the same time, when the US distanced itself from Europe due to divergent opinions on certain issues - as it was the case during Donald Trump's first term - the Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis was coming closer almost naturally, with new cooperations and ongoing economic and energy deals.

Paris also shared with Berlin a similar interpretation of Russian domestic developments. A tough yet inevitable partner, Russia remained a difficult country to grasp, with a glass ceiling when it comes to respecting democracy and the rule of law, as understood by liberal democracies. These trends of shrinking political freedoms and violating human rights, as well

¹⁵⁵ Isabel Facon, "La Politique Étrangère Sous 'Poutine III' : Quels Choix de Partenariats Pour La Russie?," *Fondation Pour La Recherche Stratégique*, 2012.

¹⁵⁶ Isabelle Facon, "La Relation France-Russie à L'épreuve", *Annuaire Français de Relations Internationales*, Vol. 15, Université Panthéon Assas, July 7, 2015.

as the various moments of Foreign policy hardening, have never prevented the belief that dialogue with Moscow was essential.¹⁵⁷

Finally, France and Germany remained Russia's main interlocutors in Europe until 2023. When war broke out in February 2022 after the invasion of the sovereign Ukrainian territory, Emmanuel Macron and Olaf Scholz were the last two Heads of state to travel to Moscow in an attempt of de-escalating the situation through a last-ditch negotiation. While the former distinguished his 7 February visit by the icy atmosphere and the distance imposed by the Russian President, the latter was received at the Kremlin in the exact same conditions eight days later. German and French leaders were even part of the very few (almost only) European Heads of State to hold telephone conversations in the first year of the war. Always aligned, these stances were harshly criticised by Ukraine and other European allies. In the end, the French President broke away with Vladimir Putin, completely overhauling his diplomatic strategy with a series of strong acts from 2023 onwards (complete breakdown of dialogue, increasing arms deliveries, NATO Ukrainian membership, etc.). Chancellor Scholz, on the other hand, stuck to traditional German positions, remaining sole in his determination not to break off interaction with Russia.

In this respect, his November 2024 phone call created major controversy in a crucial moment as the Ukrainian army was facing difficulties on the war front. Any Head of state had spoken to the Russian President since the invasion of Ukraine. Under heavy criticism in Europe, accused of seeking to restore ties with Russia, the German Chancellor defended himself by painfully reaffirming that Germany's line had not changed. Poland's Prime Minister Donald Tusk, went as far as to comment: *"no-one will stop Putin with phone calls, telephone diplomacy cannot replace real support from the whole West"*.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Institut Montaigne, "Emmanuel Macron En Russie : Regards Croisés de Paris à Saint Pétersbourg," *Institut Montaigne*, 2024.

¹⁵⁸ Kieran Kelly and Nick Gutteridge, "Scholz Criticised over Call with Putin after Russia Launches Massive Barrage," *The Telegraph*, November 17, 2024.

3.2. European Press Review: Italian, British and Polish Points of View

This section suggests a European press review of the French diplomacy's last initiative to preserve dialogue with Russia (cf. 2.3). This period has sometimes sparked strong reactions from certain European countries, especially among EU and/or NATO allies. Often misunderstood and usually criticised, Emmanuel Macron's most recent attempt to reach out to Vladimir Putin thus crystallised from 2019 to 2023. To assess these countries' reactions and try to understand the reasoning behind their positions, the press seemed to be a relevant point of reference. This press review will therefore consist in the selection of three articles published in three European countries' newspapers over the given period. In other words, French diplomatic initiatives during this "last chance" phase - both questioned and condemned - will be scrutinised.

The three countries selected for the reaction of their journalists are Italy, the United Kingdom and Poland. This choice is based on several reasons which will be explained hereunder, alongside a brief presentation of the media. It should be noted that the articles are deliberately chosen from newspapers or magazines having different political sensibilities in order to provide the fairest and most balanced assessment possible. While it is impossible to cover the entire press spectrum of each country over such a wide period, a real effort has been made to capture the heterogeneity of the media reality, by analysing other newspapers and articles that do not figure in this press review. The titles of the three articles selected are given in preamble of each section.

3.2.1. Italy

*“Macron’s stunts with Putin”*¹⁵⁹

Il Foglio, February 8th, 2022

*“Why does Macron keep saying that Putin should not be humiliated?”*¹⁶⁰

Corriere della Sera, February 20th, 2023

*“Macron and the need to negotiate keeping a channel open with the Kremlin”*¹⁶¹

La Repubblica, November, 2022

Italy is France’s close neighbour, not necessarily aligned with its foreign policy, but which has a considerable influence. Its presence within the G7 makes it a decisive power in Europe. The country is also an active member of the EU and NATO. The opinion of the Italian press on Emmanuel Macron’s diplomatic management of Russia seemed therefore extremely worthwhile to examine, analysing the markedly contrasting reactions according to the newspapers and their opinions.

Il Foglio (“The Paper”) was founded in 1996 by Giuliano Ferrara - former spokesman of Berlusconi government - and is run by a team of liberals and conservatives. It aims to be the daily newspaper of the Italian right-wing intelligentsia. During Emmanuel Macron’s last negotiations with V. Putin before Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the newspaper headlined “*acrobatics*” to describe the management of French diplomacy. With great incomprehension, the daily denounces the casualness of a Foreign Policy that was still seeking to “*build guarantees for European security*”. The author, David Carretta, highlights the risk taken by the French President in continuing to negotiate with V. Putin. In his opinion, the potential concessions to Russia would contradict the firmness already adopted by European and Atlantic allies and would also be particularly unfair to Ukraine. By recalling Russia’s shameless interpretation of the Minsk agreements, he underscores the negative consequences that could result from Emmanuel Macron’s diplomacy, which the same newspaper had described as

¹⁵⁹ David Carretta, “Le Acrobazie Di Macron Con Putin,” *Il Foglio*, February 8, 2022.

¹⁶⁰ Stefano Montefiori, “Perché Macron Continua a Dire Che Putin Non va Umiliato?,” *Corriere Della Sera*, February 20, 2023.

¹⁶¹ Anais Ginori, “Macron E La Necessità Di Trattare: Tenere Aperto Un Canale Col Cremlino,” *La Repubblica*, November 22, 2022.

“*furious*” a few years earlier.¹⁶² In listing the Russian President’s numerous failures to comply with international law, *Il Foglio* often saw Paris’s initiatives as contrary to European interests. Finally, the newspaper also pointed out the similar diplomatic moves taken by Germany, which seem to further disregard the meaning of a common mediation: “*Should it succeed, Macron’s mediation would be the outcome most feared by the eastern EU member states*”.¹⁶³

Il Corriere della Sera (“The Evening Courier”), founded in 1876, was Italy’s first daily newspaper. Serious and sober, the newspaper has weathered political storms while retaining its independence. From its inception, it was the voice of the North’s industrial bourgeoisie. Its very extensive format, unusual for a modern daily, contributes to this image of tradition. In 2023, as French Foreign Policy was evolving, Emmanuel Macron still claimed he did not want to “*humiliate Putin*”. *Corriere della Sera*’s special correspondent in Paris, Stefano Montefiori, questions why the French President “*hasn’t managed to completely sever ties*” with the Russian leader, responsible for the invasion of Ukraine. Reflecting on the various episodes where diplomacy still attempted to engage in dialogue with Russia to find a compromise on behalf of Europe, the journalist openly criticises this strategy and its lack of effectiveness. He denounces the logic of “*obsessive simultaneous approach that prevents President Macron from choosing a clear side*”.¹⁶⁴ This strategy totally contrasted with the foreign policy that other Western bloc countries wanted to pursue as a united front, leaving them feeling less powerful, as a result. The newspaper also blames France’s historical “*secular Gaullist and Russophile tradition*”, embodied by all French Presidents except François Hollande, who detached himself from it more rationally. According to the journalist, the latter led “*the most coherent foreign policy of the 21st century*” through its clarity and distance from the Kremlin. To summarise, in this article as in others, *Corriere della Sera* is highly critical of the dialogue-driven-policy conducted by Emmanuel Macron - or “*the lone rider*” (“*cavaliere solitario*”) as the journalist calls him - which seemed having played without producing any concrete result.¹⁶⁵

La Repubblica (“The Republic”) is the third newspaper analysed for Italy. Founded in 1976, it aims to be the publication of the country’s intellectual elite. With a left-wing orientation and a clear sympathy for the Democratic Party (PD), it is one of the Italian best-selling dailies. In 2022, its correspondent, Anaïs Ginori, reviews France’s strategy with Russia, trying to

¹⁶² Paola Peduzzi and Micol Flammini, “Quanto è Arrabbiato Emmanuel Macron”, *Il Foglio*, October 7, 2021.

¹⁶³ David Carretta, *op.cit.*

¹⁶⁴ Stefano Montefiori, *op.cit.*

¹⁶⁵ Paolo Valentino, “Macron Invita La Russia Alle Celebrazioni Del D-Day in Nome Della Storia E Irrita Gli Alleati (Di Oggi),” *Corriere Della Sera*, May 18, 2024.

understand Paris's initiatives. By detailing Emmanuel Macron's willingness to negotiate with Vladimir Putin, the journalist shows that the French President considered this process to be an absolute necessity to achieve peace. She also highlights some specific advances that the "*still-open*" diplomatic channel had brought in the short term. However, she stresses that this dialogue has been going on for some time, and that the French President was stubbornly pursuing an almost unattainable - albeit noble - cause. For *La Repubblica*, without criticising or supporting it, Emmanuel Macron's diplomatic action "*stands out*" from those of other European leaders, by striving for a "*balancing act*".¹⁶⁶ Two years later, while France had completely reversed its diplomatic strategy with Russia, the Italian daily remained relatively neutral, questioning the French President's new decisions, which were described as a "*dual strategy of belligerence and negotiation at the same time*".¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Anais Ginori, *op.cit.*

¹⁶⁷ Anais Ginori, "Macron E La Doppia Strategia Con La Russia: Bellicista E Negoziante. Cosa C'è Dietro Le Mosse Dell'Eliseo," *La Repubblica*, March 19, 2024.

3.2.2. United Kingdom

*“On Russia, Macron Is Mistaken”*¹⁶⁸

Chatham House, February 9th, 2021

*“What the hell does Emmanuel Macron think he’s playing at with Vladimir Putin?”*¹⁶⁹

Politico Europe (The Economist), March 10th, 2022

*“Emmanuel Macron’s diplomacy with Vladimir Putin is a high-wire act”*¹⁷⁰

The Daily Telegraph, February 7th, 2022

The United Kingdom is the second country chosen to scrutinize the press reactions on France’s foreign policy under Emmanuel Macron’s lead to negotiate with the Kremlin. Besides the withdrawal on the European scene after the 2020 Brexit contributing to a certain isolation, this country remains an actor of major importance on the international relations scene. A decisive member of NATO, and definitely one of the closest European countries to the US foreign policy, its power of influence is indisputable. Therefore, what emerges from British press seems more than relevant to proceed in this exercise. Globally critical, some opinions remain intrigued by the journalists.

The first article is based on a think-tank rather than a newspaper, but it does reflect of the British negative opinions of French foreign policy during this period. Founded in 1920, *Chatham House* engages governments, the private sector, civil society and its members in open debate and confidential discussion on the most significant developments in international affairs. Each year, the institute runs more than 300 private and public events in London and elsewhere. In 2021, while Emmanuel Macron was persevering dialogue with the Kremlin, the London think-tank director, James Nixey, didn't mince his words. The article title leaves no room for doubt: The French President is “mistaken”. According to him, if the latter “*may well be standing tall over his European counterparts*”, his openness strategy towards the Kremlin is “*repeating the mistakes of so many other Western leaders, past and present*”. The writer underlines E. Macron’s “*contradictory attitude*” while willing to consider Russia as part of Europe and

¹⁶⁸ James Nixey and Mathieu Boulègue, “On Russia, Macron Is Mistaken,” *Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank*, September 4, 2019.

¹⁶⁹ Clea Caulcutt, “What the Hell Does Emmanuel Macron Think He’s Playing at with Vladimir Putin?,” *Politico Europe*, March 10, 2022.

¹⁷⁰ James Crisp, *op.cit.*

denouncing its democratic and international law violations at the same time. He even questioned France's foreign policy awareness by affirming that "*dialogue for the sake of dialogue - without principles or concrete objectives - is a slippery slope to accommodating Russia's interests*". The first example from *Chatham House* think-tank attests to a really strong reaction from a part of the British population that sees in the French President's moves almost a betrayal with the rest of Europe. Moreover, the weakness of other countries not so involved - UK - or confirming the axis of this foreign policy – Germany - are also fiercely criticized. This way of thinking does not of course embody the whole British opinion, but it undoubtedly captures the reality of a certain mindset present at that time in the UK.¹⁷¹

In the same tone, one year after, the media *Politico Europe* headlines: "*What the hell does Emmanuel Macron think he's playing at with Vladimir Putin?*". The terms are straightforward, and we can already guess that the article's thinking will not be far from the one featured in the previous example. *Politico Europe* is an English weekly magazine based in Brussels. It was created in 2014, by *The Economist* to follow European news close to its key institutions. Now a pure player, it focuses on the activities of the European Union's and the policies of its member States. In March 2022, Emmanuel Macron is still maintaining the dialogue with Vladimir Putin attempting the miracle of finding a path to peace. For the journalist, Clea Caulcutt, there is almost indecency in keeping the line with the Kremlin while an entire country is bombed. She carefully reviews past meetings between the two leaders, which are considered pointless because they failed to produce results although they have spoken "*11 times in the last month*". She then points out that the deals obtained by the French President - set up by communications from the Elysée Palace - have never been held by its Russian counterpart. The pro-European political line of the British media is felt when the French diplomacy's effects are described as "*sunk costs of privileging Moscow at the expense of European partners*".¹⁷² In august of the same 2022, the newspaper colleagues from *The Economist*, were already critical on that point, qualifying 2019 Putin's welcoming in the south of France as a longstanding "*confirmation that Mr Macron's approach to Russia was at odds with that of much of the rest of Europe*".¹⁷³ Finally, the article concludes even challenging the

¹⁷¹ James Nixey and Mathieu Boulègue, *op.cit.*

¹⁷² Clea Caulcutt, *op.cit.*

¹⁷³ The Economist, "Emmanuel Macron Is Not as Soft on Russia as His Critics Claim," *The Economist*, August 3, 2022.

internal management of the French President's diplomacy by raising conflicts with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

More conventional, the *Daily Telegraph* is among the UK's major press organs. Atlanticist and Eurosceptic in content, pugnacious and committed in form, it is the benchmark conservative newspaper. Founded in 1855, as its title reminds us in homage to a revolutionary communications technology at the time, it is the last national daily newspaper not to have abandoned the large format. Even having a more Atlanticist line, the newspaper seems more measured in assessing France's foreign policy at the time of Emmanuel Macron's last trip to Moscow. Its Europe editor, James Crisp, considers the French President diplomacy a "*high wire mission to negotiate and reach a de-escalation*", even though he warns the latter of the necessity to correctly balance between "*offering Russia concessions and guarantee NATO's red lines*". For the journalist, Paris is taking huge risks - both externs and domestics - by pursuing the dialogue with the Kremlin but this new impetus may, in the other hand, grant a new chance for peace. Fairly more balanced, he does not avoid the negative consequences that had already - and could further - caused the strategy led by Emmanuel Macron, or the "*funambulist*", as he is called. This strategy is clearly not seen as a betrayal for European countries or NATO, although more like very hazardous diplomatic gamble in which the French President needs to "*perform political acrobatics to satisfy all sides in the crisis*". Recalling 2008 French successful mediation episode for bringing back peace in Georgia, the British newspaper reminds that France could be inspired by repeating this geopolitical achievement, giving at the same time a boost to European diplomacy.¹⁷⁴ One year after, in 2023, the *Daily Telegraph* qualifies Emmanuel Macron's foreign policy strategy for Ukraine as a "*conundrum*". Despite keeping a certain spirit of balance in their analysis, the journalists were this time slightly harsher with a French President considered "*isolated*" by its diplomatic commitments based on old schemes which look like "*antics and representing dangerous self-indulgence*".¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ James Crisp, *op.cit.*

¹⁷⁵ Telegraph View, "Macron Must Stand with Ukraine", *The Telegraph*, January 27, 2023.

3.2.3. Poland

“Macron in Warsaw: the comeback of “the France that loves us”? ”¹⁷⁶

Rzeczpospolita, February 4th, 2020

“Are France and Germany Putin’s naive children”¹⁷⁷

Wprost, February 21st, 2022

“NATO, Russia, the Balkans: what if Macron was right?”¹⁷⁸

Gazeta Wyborcza, December 12th, 2019

Poland is the third country selected to observe the European press reaction to Emmanuel Macron’s period of ultimate negotiation with Putin’s Russia. Part of the so-called “Visegrád Group”, it had always look with attention Russia’s actions, fearing an aggression animated by a turbulent past with a country which it also shares a border, due to the Kaliningrad enclave. As the Baltic States, Poland has therefore always been suspicious when it comes to Russia. Concerned by this permanent risk, the country is part of NATO since 1999 and consider the organization essential for its security and the protection of its population. The choice of examining articles from journalists who are directly part of this situation, is thus, motivated by the will to show the reaction to the French foreign policy while sharing these relevant features. Particularly harshly critical, it is yet surprising to note that the Polish press can be also more indulgent.

Poland’s second largest national daily in terms of circulation, *Rzeczpospolita* (“The Republic”) has the longest history having been founded in the 1920s. It was however suspended in 1951, at the height of Stalinist terror, only reactivated in 1981 as a “government organ presenting the reason of State on a daily basis”. In 2020, Emmanuel Macron flew finally to Poland, after a very long time and some bilateral dispute during his 2017 election campaign. This diplomatic act came at a particular time when the French President was yet pursuing his efforts towards dialogue with Russia. The journalist, Jerzy Haszczyński, highlights various important declarations concerning security matters during his official visit. This commitment

¹⁷⁶ Jerzy Haszczyński, “Francja, Która Nas Kocha,” *Rzeczpospolita*, February 4, 2020.

¹⁷⁷ Paulina Socha-Jakubowska, “Naiwne Dzieci Putina, Plany Tuska, Ile Zarabiają Pisarze, Figura O Artystach Na Marginesie”, *Wprost*, February 18, 2022.

¹⁷⁸ Ziemowit Szczerek, “Macron Powiedział Głośno To, Czego Wszyscy Się Wstydzą: Rosja Nie Zniknie, Musimy Się Dogadać,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, December 7, 2019.

against Putin's vision of history and sphere of influence theory has been appreciated by the Polish government and general opinion. *Rzeczpospolita* seems therefore to announce a change in France's approach to the Kremlin with "*less and less of enthusiasm*". The mere presence of the Head of state in Warsaw seems to convince the newspaper of deep change in France's foreign policy towards Moscow. The article reminds that in the past France had opposed for these reasons, the enlargement of the EU to include Poland and its neighbors, revealing a degree of mistrust in the writer's editorial. The latter concludes still satisfied, with a positive prediction for future, announcing a new time where France is back to being a Visegrád countries' friend, even calling French "*key EU partners saying what we would like to hear from an ally in a decisive moment*." ¹⁷⁹

Two years later, while the French President hasn't cut the communication with Vladimir Putin, the Polish opinion is less convinced. The headline of the weekly *Wprost* ("Straight to the Point") in February 2022 speaks perfectly for itself qualifying France, Putin's "*naive child*". Founded in 1982, it is one of the most important magazines in Poland. Initially distributed locally in the west region of Poznań, it then spread to the rest of the country in 1989, with the fall of communism. Conservative in morals and liberal in economics, *Wprost* is best known in Poland for its scoops. After Emmanuel Macron's last visit to Moscow, it openly displays its frustration. Paulina Socha-Jakubowska's writing doesn't beat around the bush. The journalist is incensed by the perceived conciliatory attitude of Paris towards Moscow in the simmering conflict on the Ukrainian border. By not facing up to the possibility of a conflict launched by Russia, French foreign policy - as well as the German one - is "*bringing the threat of conflict closer rather than further away*". The article unreservedly questions Franco-German diplomatic strategy: "*Emmanuel Macron and Olaf Scholz are they agents of the Kremlin?*". *Wprost* concludes by denouncing the two major Western European states that run the risk of "*provoking a deep crisis within NATO, whose other members, led by the United States, are watching with dismay*".¹⁸⁰ The weekly has been also unequivocal in two other editions of the same period questioning Germany and France's positions in the war and calling EU as "*selfish and hypocrite*", accused to be indirectly responsible for financing the war. ¹⁸¹¹⁸² This appreciation reflects a real part of the Polish opinion, marked by this spirit of incomprehension

¹⁷⁹ Jerzy Haszczyński, *op.cit.*

¹⁸⁰ Paulina Socha-Jakubowska, *op.cit.*

¹⁸¹ Jakub Mielnik, "Jak Ośmiesza Się Rząd W Berlinie, Kanclerz Olaf Scholz Tłucze Hełmami W Dno", *Wprost*, January 27, 2022.

¹⁸² Jakub Mielnik, "UE Dalej Będzie Finansować Rosyjską Wojnę Na Ukrainie. Na Polu Boju Zostały Egoizm I Hipokryzja", *Wprost*, May 30, 2022.

and betrayal while Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki had heavily criticised E. Macron's calls with Vladimir Putin in April 2022, stating that "*nobody has negotiated with Hitler*".¹⁸³ The right-wing media is not softer with French diplomacy two years later challenging in a 2024 edition, the reliability of Western Europe as a safe ally, albeit policies had reversed over Russia.¹⁸⁴ *Wprost* captures therefore a significant part of Polish opinion, violently shocked by French diplomatic initiatives. If some said that a picture is worth a thousand words, the satirical cartoons featured on the front page of the Polish magazine perfectly confirm this precept. Two of them were particularly striking in the editions reviewed in this section (cf. Figures 1 and 2 in appendix).

Despite this feeling of anger towards the diplomacy of dialogue conducted by France, another interpretation existed in Poland at that time. It is, for instance the case in December 2019, where *Gazeta Wyborcza* ("The Electoral Gazette"), questioned Emmanuel Macron's actions in a much more neutral tone, leaving space for potential relevance in its foreign policy. Founded in May 1989, this newspaper is Poland's largest daily in terms of circulation, excluding tabloids. Open to a range of sensibilities on economic issues, it promotes a liberal, tolerant and European Poland when it comes to major social issues. It also cultivates the tradition of Polish-style literary reporting. Contrary to a majority of commentators in the country, the reporter Ziemowit Szczerek, a specialist in South-East Europe, believes that in the French President polemical declarations and moves, he is openly expressing what everyone else thinks without daring to say it. The journalist also points out other "forgotten" international dynamics which are inevitably playing a role in the crisis. For instance, he reminds the longstanding fear from the Anglo-Saxon side to see Europe unified until Russia, the only project capable of threatening the global domination of the United States. "*If Central Europe joins the chorus of France, Germany and Russia*", he said, "*the last obstacle to the completion of this project will disappear*". The controversial writer shares Emmanuel Macron's conclusions on NATO as a "*death brain*" and the need to support a European path of defence event if "*this initiative is still limited, symbolic and not very concrete, but clearly signaling that Europe is in a position to take the lead*". In the end, even though it concerns the time preceding the Ukrainian

¹⁸³ Yusuf Özcan, "France: Macron Qualifie de Scandaleuses Les Critiques Du Premier Ministre Polonais," *AA*, 2022.

¹⁸⁴ Jakub Mielnik, "Srogie Polityczne Manto,,Macron Poobijany, Scholz Się Chowa. Czy to Koniec Unii, Jaką Znamy?," *Wprost*, June 13, 2024.

war, it is worth observing the singularity of *Gazeta Wyborcza*'s analysis of French diplomatic strategy with Russia and Europe, considering reasonable, Emmanuel Macron's calculations.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁵ Ziemowit Szczerek, *op.cit.*

3.3. Russian Commitments Towards Europe

*“Western democracies are as natural friends and eventual allies of the Democratic Russia as they are foes of the totalitarian USSR”*¹⁸⁶

Andrei Kozyrev, 1992

*“We are part of the Western European culture. No matter where our people live, in the Far East or in the south, we are Europeans”*¹⁸⁷

Vladimir Putin, 2003

3.3.1. Western Strategic Orientations

If France and Germany have for a long time considered Russia as an important foreign policy partner, Russia has similarly deemed desirable to enjoy good relations with Western Europe. The Russian specialist and historian, Andrei Tsygankov, even argued in his research that the relationship between Russia's Foreign Policy and the Russian national interest can be understood in the context of Moscow's rapprochement with the West. Thus, when the identity of the Russian nation evolves, it tends to have an impact on the governance of Foreign Policy and its resulting diplomatic strategies that may or not encourage rapprochement.¹⁸⁸ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian identity altered, giving way to a reformulation of national interests. Russian foreign policy has indeed gradually sought dialogue and cooperation with European countries. Numerous diplomatic initiatives, sometimes emanating from Russia alone, illustrate this approach. The previous sections have shown different cases with France and Germany, but the ties developed also in other countries such as Italy. After the Cold War, the aim was to integrate Russia into the Western dynamic and its economic, political and security institutions. Based on a “*natural partnership with Europe*”, the objective was to develop strong links with those countries which would restore Russia's status, by their importance on the European stage. The strategy was therefore to gain influence over organisations such as the EU, NATO or the G7. Belonging to the liberal movement of that time,

¹⁸⁶ Andrei P. Tsygankov, “The Post-Cold War Euphoria and Russia's Liberal Westernism,” in *Russia's Foreign Policy*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 59.

¹⁸⁷ Andrei P. Tsygankov, “The World after September 11 and Pragmatic Cooperation,” in *Russia's Foreign Policy*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 135.

¹⁸⁸ Andrei P. Tsygankov, “Preface,” in *Russia's Foreign Policy*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), xxvii.

Boris Yeltsin's foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, embodied this period of openness in the 1990s. Under his leadership, Russia joined the G7 and the Paris Club of creditors in 1992, obtaining several billion dollars for a reconstruction programme in Russia. During the same years, Russia had in fact constant recourse to loans provided by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Besides, the new Russian order rapidly became interested in European security issues. In 1993, the head of Russian diplomacy forthrightly demonstrated his desire to join institutions in question, even expressing the ambition to enter in a NATO as an official member. A formal cooperation began within the framework of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC). Despite this firm commitment towards Europe, this phase experienced a slow takeoff, mainly due to the multiple internal divisions over Russian national interests. These rifts were so significant at the time that they even triggered a shift in Foreign Policy strategy, as illustrated by the 1996 appointment of Yevgeny Primakov as the new Foreign Minister.¹⁸⁹

The alliance with NATO was paradoxically further developed while he was in office, completing the process initiated under Kozyrev's impetus. In 1997, the "Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security" between Russia and NATO was signed. This act consisted of a rapprochement and close collaboration with the Atlantic organisation. Russia enjoyed a special status as part of the permanent consultation mechanism. The Russians perceived this achievement almost as an institutionalisation of their relations with West and NATO.¹⁹⁰ Even so, the agreement gave rise to intense debate within the Russian political class. Some understood it as an opportunity to modernise the Russian armed forces and strengthen cooperation with the West, whereas other opinions opposed it, considering inconceivable to deal with NATO, as its recent enlargement had been felt as a betrayal of the promises made at the end of the Cold War. However, a third way of thinking agreed on the enlargement preoccupations as a direct threat to national security but supported the act, believing it would prevent further expansions. Thanks to this political calculation, Russia accepted the act in its majority, committing to strengthened ideological and diplomatic ties with the alliance. Thus, despite these internal tensions fuelling a degree of mistrust, this decision is one of the hallmarks of Russia's new Foreign Policy. In a more pragmatic posture, the latter is seeking to re-establish cooperation with the West while defending its own strategic interests. In a speech to the State

¹⁸⁹ Andrei P. Tsygankov, "The Post-Cold War Euphoria and Russia's Liberal Westernism," in *Russia's Foreign Policy*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 59–97.

¹⁹⁰ Thérèse Delpech, "La Question Russe Après l'Accord Avec L'OTAN," *Politique Étrangère* 62, no. 3 (1997): 279–89.

Duma at the end of 1997, Yevgeny Primakov even claimed that the NATO-Russia Act was one of the “*major achievements and evidence of Russia’s diplomacy in obtaining its own objectives*”. Although Russian concerns about NATO had not totally disappeared, this act undoubtedly brought Russia closer to the Atlantic Alliance. This rationale approach consequently boosted relations with the West and this dynamic lasted in the following years, particularly with Vladimir Putin’s accession to power.¹⁹¹

3.3.2. *Rapprochement on Security and Economic Priorities*

With the new President, but also in the post 9/11 climate of the fight against terrorism, Russian foreign policy entered in a new phase. Its diplomatic aim was to provide a new impetus for collaboration with the West in a “pragmatic cooperation” that articulated a new vision for the Russian national interest. The two main Foreign Policy objectives at this time were economic reconstruction and the fight against Islamist terrorism, to which Russia is particularly confronted with several cells in its Muslim-majority regions (Chechnya, Dagestan, etc.). The proliferation of this threat was therefore an opportunity to forge closer ties with the West, which were also heavily affected, albeit the terrorism had diverse origins. Hence, even though anti-Western feelings still drove part of the Russian political class and public opinion, President Putin didn’t hesitate to actively promote Russia’s bonds with the United States and Europe, compare to a certain passivity adopted when it comes to relations with Asia. Without embracing an overly liberal or pro-Western line, the new President intended to defend Russia’s political interests in a new world order that had been drastically reshaped. Furthermore, his pragmatism has succeeded in synthesising the perspectives of Russia’s political offer by appeasing internal divisions with an identity-based project over the long-term.

As a result, a tactical alliance began with the West on the terrorism issue. The latter was based on “*shared cultural values*” which were opposed to those of the terrorists, considered as “*barbaric and medieval*”. Alike Andrei Kozyrev’s “*strategic integration*”, this civilisational rapprochement was intended to be part of the West bloc, to which Russia deemed definitely to belong. For some Russians, the choice to get the western world closer was inevitable, since the opposite would have meant remaining weak and isolated. Vladimir Putin globally shared this view, yet emphasizing the alliance with Europe, rather than with the United States in the fight

¹⁹¹ Andrei P. Tsygankov, “New Security Challenges and Great Power Balancing,” in *Russia’s Foreign Policy*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 97–135.

against terrorism. This policy produced concrete results and seemed accepted in Russia, while appearing fairly balanced, neither anti-Islamic nor pro-American. This last argument is one of the reasons why the Russian President tended to encourage the development of relations with European countries. Russia's interests and internal pressure resulted more in a strategic alliance with Europe instead of the United States. In his 2002 address to the nation, Vladimir Putin clearly stated this intention as a priority: "*We have to firmly proclaim our priorities on the European direction*".

The desire for integration was explicitly expressed and a real dialogue gradually developed with several allies. This time was marked for instance by the close relationship with Gerhard Schröder and Jacques Chirac, which took a concrete shape. The trio France-Germany-Russia aligned particularly against the American intervention in Iraq, and for other diplomatic matters which the previous part mentioned in more details (cf. 3.1). In 2005, both were among the few Heads of state to accept Vladimir Putin's invitation to the "Celebrations of Victory over Nazi Fascism" in Moscow. Some Eastern European countries already interpreted their presence as an insult to their past under Soviet occupation.¹⁹²

Putin's philosophy of pragmatic cooperation became gradually entrenched in Russian Foreign Policy, with Europe at the centre of the Kremlin's diplomatic concerns, with the final aim to restore Russia's status as a dominant power on the international stage. This integration strategy also involved a commitment to respect Western democratic values regarding international law, freedoms and market liberalisation. With Europe, the fight against terrorism and the energy cooperation were two areas seriously explored. At the time, the European market accounted for 40% of Russian energy exports and 55% of Russian trade was with European countries.¹⁹³ Cultural and security initiatives were similarly undertaken with the same to bring Europe and Russia within the same common sphere. In 2003, Vladimir Putin even suggested to abolish visas for travelling between Russia and the EU. This idea was received officially in Europe, leading to serious debates between European MPs. France supported it, but it was finally abandoned, although during the 2004 Luxembourg summit, the two parties did manage to agree on a free movement of persons and goods between the freshly integrated Lithuania and the enclave of Kaliningrad. In 2006, still with the French backing, a deal was concluded to

¹⁹² Andrei P. Tsygankov, "The World after September 11 and Pragmatic Cooperation," in *Russia's Foreign Policy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 135–77.

¹⁹³ *Ibidem*.

facilitate visa issuance between EU countries and Russia. This entente made France the first European country to support an agreement of this type with Moscow. Russian leaders greatly appreciated this new support since the issue was sensitive from a political, symbolic and economic point of view.¹⁹⁴ The efficiency of the rapprochement policy has been materialised at bilateral level rather than with Brussels. Nonetheless, EU-Russia summits were held twice a year since 2002, focusing mostly on economic aspects. That same year, the NATO-Russia cooperation took the form of a permanent Council (NRC), which operated and met regularly until the 2014 annexation of Crimea.

Dmitry Medvedev's arrival in power pursued the pro-European line of his predecessor - who became Prime Minister - despite the tensions generated by the Georgian crisis. Slightly earlier, in June 2008, the new Russian President attended his first EU-Russia summit, hosted in a warm atmosphere in the oil-producing region of Khanty-Mansiysk (Ural). This meeting gave the opportunity to approve a new strategic mutual framework, extending the long-standing economic cooperation. The experts observed in fact during this summit that between 2000 and 2007, commercial flows between the two parties had almost tripled, reaching 233 billion euros, and Russia's share in the EU's total foreign trade in goods had almost doubled.¹⁹⁵

3.3.3. *Exploring Alternatives to NATO*

In 2008, Dmitry Medvedev invited European countries to create a pan-European defence alliance as a viable alternative to NATO. Just as Vladimir Putin had suggested a few months earlier in Bucharest, the Russian President urged Russia to join a European security system "*from Vancouver to Vladivostok*"¹⁹⁶, warning at the same time that expanding NATO without including Russia would "*undermine and damage relations with the Alliance for a long time to come. There will be no confrontation, although the price will be high*".¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Communauté européenne and Fédération de Russie, "Accord Entre La Communauté Européenne et La Fédération de Russie Visant à Faciliter La Délivrance de Visas Aux Citoyens de l'Union Européenne et de La Fédération de Russie", 2006.

¹⁹⁵ Slovenian Presidency of the EU 2008, "EU-Russia Summit: The Start of a New Age," June 27, 2008.

¹⁹⁶ Andrei P. Tsygankov, "U.S. Regime Change Strategy and Great Power Assertiveness," in *Russia's Foreign Policy*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 177–209.

¹⁹⁷ Vladimir Socor, "Medvedev Proposes All-European Security Pact during Berlin Visit," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, no. 109, June 9, 2008.

Without specifying this price, Dmitry Medvedev clearly asserted the Russian position regarding future enlargements and called for a “*time-out*” of all decisions going in this direction. He also expressed his “*extreme disappointment*” about the American deal planning the deployment missile defence systems in Czech Republic and Poland. In these regards, France is one of the few European countries - along with Germany - to have shown some interest in President Medvedev’s initiative to develop this new European security architecture. Paris and Berlin considered Russia’s argumentation to be partly admissible: this deployment, even if it was carried out bilateral basis, evidently failed to meet the commitments made by Washington and NATO towards Moscow at the beginning of the 1990s. Hence, without these French and German approvals, sometimes tacit, Russia would not have enjoyed the same success in its opposition to the United States.

Likewise, with regard to NATO enlargement question, France’s reserves on Georgia and Ukraine, explained essentially by the need for Russia to “digest” previous enlargements, were no secret at the time and were further serving Russian approach. French diplomacy also made a distinction between the Ukrainian and Georgian issues. In the former, the country’s political evolution was uncertain, and NATO membership was not, according to Paris, supported by Ukrainian public opinion. In the case of Georgia, Nicolas Sarkozy repeated that eventual membership would not automatically resolve the secessionist aspirations of Abkhazia and Ossetia, perhaps even encouraging them. The need to rebuild a degree of trust between international players was implicit in the French President’s Foreign Policy, which thus wasn’t at odds with Russian diplomats’ rhetoric. In 2007, during Munich Conference on Security, President Vladimir Putin confirmed this logic by referring to the seven new states joining NATO in 2004 as “*a provocation that undermines mutual trust, which legitimately allow us to wonder against whom this enlargement is being directed.*”¹⁹⁸

Moscow’s numerous reactions can be explained by its perception of “threat” arising from the Atlantic alliance’s expansion. Western geopolitical initiatives in countries and regions that Russia had traditionally always considered as its “spheres of influence”, contributed therefore to the “*Russian exacerbation and sense of vulnerability*”. Moreover, the famous “frozen conflicts” - concerning bordering areas where are frequently living Russian minorities - had been leveraged by Russia to keep control on these expansions, through a tacit deal ensuring

¹⁹⁸ Pierre Haski, “La Conférence de Munich Sur La Sécurité, Là Où La Confrontation a Commencé Entre Poutine et Les Occidentaux,” *France Inter*, Radio France, February 17, 2023.

territorial integrity (and no invasion), in exchange for NATO non-membership. Moldova roughly accepted this deal for Transnistria, but the Ukrainian, Georgian and Azeri cases were far more complex. The former Soviet countries had always remained watchful of their Russian neighbour, fearing unilateral intervention at any moment, which directly contributed to the increasing political instability and dissent in these regions (cf. coloured revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia). Meanwhile, the West had recognised at the beginning of 2008, Kosovo Republic's independence at the expense of Serbia, which was besides Moscow's historic ally. As an evident consequence, Russian diplomacy decided to increase its reliance on the separatist republics, feeling more legitimate to use this lever as a mean of exerting pressure on NATO and its enlargement.¹⁹⁹

To conclude, Russia has managed to foster its relations with Europe for a certain period of time. Based on solid links with countries such as France and Germany, Russian rulers have tried - when domestic policy enabled it - to keep strengthening dialogue with Western countries. After Dmitry Medvedev's modernist term, Vladimir Putin's return to power in 2012 marked a new shift in Russian Foreign Policy. The ever-increasing feeling of "threat" on the Russian side resulted progressively in an intense distancing from the West and European countries, further accentuated by the 2014 Ukrainian crisis. The historian Andrei Tsygankov skillfully connects the accusations that the two sides have been making against each other in order to draw up a synthesis, in which he emphasizes the triggering role of spheres of influence: "*The crisis in Ukraine resulted in part from Russia and the European Union and the United States' attempts to pull Kiev in their own areas of influence by further straining Russia's relations with the West.*"²⁰⁰

Yet, despite the significant sanctions imposed on Russia, and a deteriorating general climate of relations, the annexation of Crimea did not change the very substance of Vladimir Putin's pragmatic cooperation, and its will to preserve deep economic ties with its European allies. The Normandy Format set up by France and Germany to resolve the conflict in Donbas (cf. 2.2) further proved that communication with Europe went on. Cultural and sports linkages also continued to flourish. In 2014, Russia successfully hosted the Sochi Winter Olympics, and in

¹⁹⁹ Andrei P. Tsygankov, "Global Instability and Russia's Vision of Modernization," in *Russia's Foreign Policy*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 209–33.

²⁰⁰ Andrei P. Tsygankov, "The West, the Non-West, and Russia's 'Civilizational' Turn," in *Russia's Foreign Policy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 233–61.

2018, the International Football Federation (FIFA), organised the World Cup - biggest and most watched event in the world – in eleven cities across the country from Kaliningrad to Volga and Ural. Vladimir Putin held, in this context, a long meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron, who had travelled in Moscow for France's victory in the final game. These major events had positive diplomatic impacts on Russia's reputation at the time. Notwithstanding these encouraging parentheses, Russia's distance from the West didn't cease over the years, with a gradual deterioration until the 2022 Ukraine invasion, marking a decisive turning point for the relations with European and Western countries. Since this time, Russia has been de facto orientating its Foreign Policy towards Central Asia and China.²⁰¹

²⁰¹ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *op.cit.*

CHAPTER 2/ THE ROLE OF FRENCH FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MYTH'S DECONSTRUCTION

1. Influence and Historical Discords

*“The situation has changed in France and a shift is needed. The Communist Party is not strong enough to strike the government’s head. It must gather strength and seek allies.”*²⁰²

Joseph Stalin, to Maurice Thorez (PCF leader), 1944

*“The terrible events of the war led many of those who listened to the leaders of this strange party to take an active part in the struggle against France’s enemies. Undoubtedly though, the masters of their game had only come to this decision after the German invasion of Soviet Russia”*²⁰³

Charles de Gaulle, on the French Communist Party (PCF), 1947

1.1.The Roots of an Old Antagonism

While Franco-Russian relations have been marked by a large series of initiatives giving the relationship between the two nations a distinct and special character - as shown in the first chapter - a series of historical facts, fuelled by various deep-seated discords, contradict this assertion. The historian and Russia expert, Alexandre Jevakhoff, makes it quite clear when he points out: *“Historically, France and Russia have always been false friends: for the most part, their diplomatic relations - imperial, Soviet, post-Soviet - have been dominated by indifference, incomprehension and hostility”*.²⁰⁴

²⁰² Stéphane Courtois, “Thorez, Staline et La France. De La Libération à La Guerre Froide”, *Matériaux Pour l’Histoire de Notre Temps*, La Contemporaine, no. 1, 1995.

²⁰³ Le Monde, “Le Général de Gaulle Accuse Le Parti Communiste de Mettre En Péril l’Unité Nationale”, *Le Monde*, July 28, 1947.

²⁰⁴ Alexandre Jevakhoff, “Historiquement, La France et La Russie Sont de Faux Amis”, *L’Opinion*, June 5, 2023.

He recalled the evidence that the “natural” friendship between the two states does not necessarily exist, rather, what may unite them is purely and simply their interests. These interests had not always converged, the two countries witnessing some great differences on several issues such as geography, where France had its sights set on West while Russia often used to look at its eastern endpoint; or religion, which had admitted France as the “eldest daughter of the Church” due to the country age-old conversion to Catholicism by its first king, whereas Russia has always been one of the epicenters of the Orthodox world, with the Moscow Patriarchate, if not the largest, by far the most numerous with its 90 million faithful. As a consequence of this contrast, foreign policy strategies have often taken radically opposed paths, thereby failing to align. Before his triumphal visit of 1717, Peter the Great was not accepted at Versailles’ court. In fact, Louis XIV transmitted to his heirs the scant regard he had for Russia, establishing a tradition which lasted very long time. Indeed, the following kings of France often showed little interest in the Russian court, despite the overtures of some Tsars, even before Peter the Great. The French philosopher Saint-Simon neatly captured this idea when he talked about “*this mad contempt we have for Russia*”, he frequently described as a “*barbarian land*”.²⁰⁵

As a result, France was absolutely not part of his 1697-98 “Grand Embassy” which has been one of the major Russian diplomatic missions in Western Europe at the time, the Tsar travelling in about ten countries, among which Sweden, Austria, Germany, England and the Dutch Empire. Thereafter, Russia enjoyed intense commercial and human exchanges with all these peoples, especially Germans, who even had a neighborhood in Moscow from the mid-16th century, known as the “German quarter”. Furthermore, France’s proximity to the Ottoman Empire – Russia’s greatest enemy at the time - was particularly not appreciated. Globally, from this period until the Franco-Russian Alliance, the relationship had seen two centuries of hostility, from the Seven Years’ War ultimate changing side to Napoleon’s campaigns with the Cossacks twice occupying Paris in 1814 and 1815, not forgetting the 1853-56 Crimean War. All these conflicts are usually interpreted as an outrageous betrayal by both sides.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ Alfred Rambaud. “Histoire de La Russie: Depuis Les Origines Jusqu’à l’Année 1877”, (Gallica, 1878), 409.

²⁰⁶ Alexandre Jevakhoff, *op.cit*

The Franco-Russian entente, if it has existed at certain times, was thus only spontaneous and established on the basis of shared interests. For instance, it is worth looking at the period following the Franco-Russian Alliance of 1893, which had a direct and positive impact during the First World War. This symbolic time is considered to be one of the best periods for relations between France and Russia, participating in the myth of the “privileged relationship”. Brutally ended with the Bolsheviks’ Revolution, it actually only lasted 25 years, which, in the context of century-old-diplomatic relations, is not particularly significant. All the pacts or peace treaties that followed (1935-1939, 1944-1954) have always been of a shorter duration, proving the relevance of the argument. From the financial point of view, this alliance had also resulted to be unfair, French banks massively financing the Russian Treasury with loans thanks to citizens savers who will be cheated in 1917 when V. Lenin simply cancelled the Tsarist debt commitments overnight. These credits had never been repaid ever since, despite De Gaulle and other Presidents’ endeavors to reach an agreement.²⁰⁷ Besides, regarding economics, at the turn of the century, the French commercial presence did not reflect the importance acquired by France as a financial sponsor. The French investments mainly concerned the small business sector, losing the biggest industrial markets to other foreign investors. Russia’s foreign trade was indeed at the time in the hands of the Germans and the British’s. This example sheds light on a feature that has become a characteristic of Franco-Russian partnership which lacked solid commercial bases that would have enabled long-term French penetration.²⁰⁸

1.2. Political Relay through the French Communist Party (PCF)

During the 1917 Revolution, France had supported the Tsar army against the communists which after accession to power, took a critical view of the Paris government. The same Bolsheviks signed in 1918 Brest-Litovsk’s separate peace with the German Empire, completely achieving the deception of the 1893 Alliance. Oppositions and incomprehensions didn’t cease all along the Cold War, with a Soviet Regime determined to convert the world by all means, including the influence of internal politics. The issue of interfering in domestic affairs, frequently practiced in Russia, has therefore also concerned and affected the

²⁰⁷ Romain Yakemtchouk, “Une Alliance Franco-Russe,” in *La France et La Russie. Alliances et Discordances*, (Editions L’Harmattan, 2011), 65–80.

²⁰⁸ Claude Estier, “Rapport Fait Au Nom de La Commission Des Affaires Étrangères, de La Défense et Des Forces Armées Sur Le Projet de Loi Autorisant La Ratification Du Traité Entre La France et La Russie,” N° 30, *Sénat*, 1992.

relationship with France. Several historical cases and matters have proved a real implication of Russian services at different levels in spheres of French power, which could involve election campaigns, political financing, espionage or even soft influence. In Western Europe after the Second World War, the USSR sponsored communist parties to widespread its ideology. These links were particularly striking in Italy, France and Spain, which all witnessed a gradual rise in popular votes, reaching sometimes massive results. All three communist parties (PCI, PCF, PCE) were not hiding their ties with Moscow.²⁰⁹ Supervised by the *Komintern* office, they were solid leverages on which Moscow could peacefully transmit its political propaganda in Western Europe. Each of them had as well an important media coverage supporting Marxism and Soviet regime initiatives. The French newspaper *L'Humanité* fueled the fundamental principle of their “proletarian internationalism” ideology, defending workers against capitalism and imperialism. In France, this phenomenon has been embodied by the figure of Maurice Thorez, PCF General Secretary, who achieved important results, albeit never accessing to leading power. The French Communist Party (PCF) participated however to several governments between 1944 and 1947. During this time, the Party reached the highest enrolment level in its history, with almost one million members, becoming a major political force in France. After 1946 legislative elections, PCF led the polls with 28%, gaining 182 MPs in National Assembly.²¹⁰

On several occasions, the debate raised the question of the nature of the links between the PCF and the Soviet regime, Moscow’s attempts to exploit the PCF, and the growing resistance in France. The 1944 exchanges between M. Thorez and J. Stalin illustrate this undeniable connection. Although the Communist Party only recognised it in the 1960s, Thorez sought refuge in Moscow from 1939, and not 1943 as the official version long claimed. In fact, in November 1939, he was convicted of “desertion in wartime”, even losing French nationality a year later. Therefore, the French leader did not wait for the breakdown of the German Soviet Pact to pledge allegiance to the Stalinist Regime, raising after the war, obvious concerns on the French political class over interference and independence. Already in 1936, M. Thorez was defending entente with Nazi Germany and Italian Fascism to “*preserve peace at any price*”, in line with Moscow’s thinking.²¹¹ Stalin personally negotiated his return with the French

²⁰⁹ Silvio Pons, “Stalin and the European Communists after World War Two (1943-1948),” *Past & Present* 210, no. Supplement 6 (January 1, 2011): 121–38.

²¹⁰ Roger Martelli, “Les Effectifs Du PCF de 1920 à 2009: Tableaux et Cartes,” *Fondation Gabriel Péri*, October 6, 2014.

²¹¹ Gérard Walter, “La Ronde de la Paix”, in *Histoire Du Parti Communist Français* (Editions A. Somogy, 1948), 332-341.

government in 1944.²¹² In June 1940, the same context brought the PCF press organ, *L'Humanité*, to officially negotiate its reappearance and publication with the Nazi authorities, in the context of occupied France, just few days after the end of military debacle.²¹³ While these negotiations finally didn't prove a success, the communist newspaper continued to publish – as others – clandestine editions until the end of the war. In this respect, *L'Humanité* was literally borrowing the Soviet press' tone, praising the benefits of the August 1939 Pact, achieved with Germany, which *Pravda* was still celebrating at the end of 1940 (cf. Figure 3 in the appendix). This Russian indulgence towards the former German enemy was thus perceptible in the exact same way among the French daily papers. Indeed, on July the 13th of 1940, an article reported: “*Franco-German fraternity: it is particularly comforting, in these unhappy times, to see the friendly conversations between many Parisian workers and German soldiers increasing. We are happy to see that.*”²¹⁴ (cf. Figures 4 & 5 in the appendix).

Later, the newspaper headlined to be in mourning when J. Stalin died, expressing devotion and respect towards the bloody dictator. Different investigations have revealed the control exercised by Moscow and its political *Komintern* on the PCF and its press body. All important information and decisions were reported to Moscow, thanks to direct communication lines. Other archives show us that, from the 1930s onwards, the orientations of the PCF were largely dictated by the imperatives of the USSR foreign policy. For instance, both communists' decisions not to participate in Socialist governments in 1936 and 1938 were decided by J. Stalin. In 1944, J. Staline even received M. Thorez before his return to France, in order to give him guidelines that the PCF would respect. For the following ten years, the party's internal methods and policies had implemented these recommendations, which were successful in allying moderate left-wing parties leading to De Gaulle's weakness and resignation in 1946. It seemed therefore pretty obvious that the French Party General Secretary was assuming the role of spokesperson and implementer, while the real decision-maker was the USSR's supreme leader.

Although it is true that the PCF had the legitimacy to defend a political line and ideas for the country, this case reveals however the clear interference of Soviet authorities in French internal political affairs, influencing not only popular vote and public opinion, but also strategic circumstances such as the decisive contribution of the communist activists in French Resistance, playing significant role before the Liberation. In respect to this sacrifice, for a long

²¹² Stéphane Courtois, *op. cit.*

²¹³ Michel Lefebvre, “Quand Le PCF Négociait Avec Les Nazis,” *Le Monde*, December 9, 2006.

²¹⁴ *L'Humanité*, “Le Peuple a son mot à dire”, *Clandestine Edition n°61, L'Humanité*, July 13, 1940.

time, the party allegiance and submission to Moscow had been passed over in silence, ignored, or even denied.²¹⁵ History has then proved this connection and Russian Soviet exceptional influence, directly impacting France's national interest, and, although France also had secret services and spies in Russia, the situation was not equivalent in the other direction.

By calling itself for long, "the party of the "75,000 executed", the PCF took more than 50 years to recognise this evidence, admitting it officially only in the early 2000s, through the voice of its First Secretary, Marie-George Buffet: "*Without doubt, we must continue to examine our past critically and objectively. Beyond condemning Stalinism, we must continue to understand why we participated for so long, until its collapse, in a failed conception of communism*".²¹⁶

1.3. Interference in the Context of Espionage

Although the interference in internal politics through the ever-increasing weightiness of the PCF, the Russian regime had tried to influence other spheres following its Foreign Policy interests, using sometimes non-usual methods, not to say illegal and unethical ones. During the 1960s, the revelation of the "Dejean case" illustrated perfectly this Russian attempt to intrude into French affairs. While De Gaulle had returned to power a few years earlier, he discovered in 1964 that the French Ambassador to Moscow had been compromised by the Russian intelligence services (KGB). Maurice Dejean was indeed holding for eight years one of the most prestigious positions in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Loyal diplomat and General de Gaulle's longstanding comrade, he worked hard during his career for rapprochement between France and the USSR. Aware of the key role he played, and the stature he had, the Russian authorities, on the direct order of N. Khrushchev, sought to take advantage of the situation by bribing him with a trap. Thanks to a Russian actress sent to seduce him, the KGB blackmailed the French Ambassador with incriminating videotapes. The attempt to infiltrate the French government, set up by the KGB by deceiving one of its agents, has been proved by the revelations of one of the agents in charge of the operation, Yuri Krotkov, who had defected to the West, as well as the confession of Maurice Dejean himself.²¹⁷

²¹⁵ Philippe Buton, "Les Militaires et Le Communisme à La Libération," *Militaires En République, 1870-1962*, (Éditions de la Sorbonne, 1999), 449–53.

²¹⁶ Marie-George Buffet, "Déclaration de la Ministre de La Jeunesse et Des Sports Sur Le Communisme, La Place Du PCF Dans Le Paysage Politique et Le Projet Communiste.", October 1, 2001.

²¹⁷ Patrick Pesnot, "Affaire Maurice Dejean: L'infiltration Soviétique En France Dans Les Années 60," *Rendez-vous avec X, France Inter*, May 21, 2022.

Moscow probably believed it could keep an eye on General de Gaulle's strategy and affect French diplomacy and the Western camp, by holding an influential actor of the French President's entourage. As France was encouraging its Foreign Policy towards "entente", with the aim of preserving relations with the USSR, these interference attempts weren't impactful enough to seriously affect De Gaulle's strategy. His willingness for independence has therefore been used by the Kremlin to misinform, infiltrate networks and try to weaken the Atlantic Alliance. In the 1970s, the USSR took advantage of the French policy of détente to engage in a systematic plundering of French technology. Moscow was gaining from this policy, with the hope of maintaining the special role that Paris wanted to play on the international stage in order to divide the Western camp.²¹⁸ In this regard, Prime Minister Michel Debré's security advisor, Constantin Melnik, once commented: "*Gaullism, more than any other political movement, was teeming with agents of influence from the KGB, and we have never managed to get rid of them from De Gaulle's entourage*".²¹⁹

Although there is no concrete evidence whether they had a great impact on French Gaullist policies, these revelations stress once again the Soviet desire to interfere with French domestic affairs. Other affairs, such as the "Topaze scandal", which suspected the prominent Gaullist Jacques Foccart of being a Soviet spy from the very beginning, or the conviction of the civil servant Georges Pâques, reinforced the doubts on KGB agents' prominence in France. These espionage cases all confirmed as well as the suicide of the French Defense Attaché to Moscow in 1962, that France was undoubtedly an objective of Soviet espionage, contributing to the relevance of the Russian will to interfere in internal affairs during this period.²²⁰ In the name of prestige and to preserve relations with Russia, these scandals were often kept from the French public opinion, based on a plural tacit agreement, as the majority of the political spectrum were diversely involved.²²¹

These incidents proceeded until the collapse of the Soviet bloc, even after De Gaulle's period. The Russian meddling in French and European affairs has been therefore acknowledged, even amplifying the deterioration of Franco-Russian relations. Under the President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, for example, the Soviet Military Attaché in Paris, Colonel

²¹⁸ Thierry Wolton, "Preface," in *Le KGB En France* (Grasset, 2014).

²¹⁹ Patrick Pesnot, *op. cit.*

²²⁰ Alain Peyrefitte, "Un Pays Qui Tienne Debout", in *C'était de Gaulle*, (Editions Fayard, 1997), Vol. II, 96-100.

²²¹ Thierry Wolton, *op. cit.*

Victor Penkov, was caught red-handed seeking intelligence in July 1978, and immediately sent back to Russia.²²² During this time, French and Russian Foreign Policies were opposing on the Afghanistan issue. The Soviet troops had indeed invaded the Islamic country in December 1979, officially providing assistance to the Afghan regime against the *mujahideen* revolt, backed by the US administration and the UK. For a decade, the conflict was bogged down, and Afghanistan became a theatre of the Cold War. France didn't take part in the support and denounced the invasion belatedly, opting for its "multipolar and peaceful diplomacy", where the country aimed to be "friends with everyone".²²³ After months, Paris finally reacted, morally condemning the intervention, but still using diplomatic means to put pressure on Russia. Contrary to other Western countries, France for example didn't boycott the 1980 Moscow Olympics. V. Giscard d'Estaing saw his strategy severely criticized by European allies perceiving its policy as too indulgent towards the USSR, which contributed to the general weakening of the French President, weighing as well on his 1981 election defeat. Even if General de Gaulle's policy of *détente* had quickly turned into exasperation with the Cold War, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's disruptive choices on Foreign Policy, somewhat more Atlanticist, weren't understood during the second part of his term.²²⁴

Finally, in the 1980s, the "Farewell Dossier" had been probably the most important scandal involving Paris and Moscow, having a colossal impact on relations of the Western bloc with Russia. The affair witnessed the defection of an important KGB agent named Vladimir Vetrov, who revealed to the French intelligence service - the *Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire* (DST) - thousands of sensitive Soviet information, among which the list of many Russian agents deployed in all western countries. The collaboration between the DST and the American CIA in this affair proved additionally the reorientation of the French Foreign Policy, taking more concretely an Atlanticist stance. As a direct consequence, the US and France both proceeded to the expulsion of hundreds of Russian diplomats: in 1983, US President Ronald Reagan expelled 300 of them while his French counterpart, François Mitterrand pronounced 47 evictions the same year. This decision was unprecedented for the Franco-Russian relations at the time, provoking Soviet regime great anger and protest. The official press release from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed a similar indignation, justifying the expulsion of

²²² Le Monde, "Convaincu d'Espionnage Le Colonel Victor Penkov 'Quitte' La France", *Le Monde*, July 31, 1978.

²²³ Hervé Gardette, "La Politique Étrangère de Valéry Giscard D'Estaing", *L'Esprit Public, France Culture*, August 24, 2014.

²²⁴ Hervé Gardette, *op. cit.*

the Soviet agents on the grounds of “*the multiplicity and seriousness of the interventions carried out for the USSR’s interests by agents enjoying in most cases diplomatic civil servant status*”.²²⁵

The Farewell scandal certainly caused the collapse of the Soviet information program and, thanks to his courage and feelings, V. Vetrov had played a crucial role in a moment more than decisive for the Cold War. Later, the repentant spy had been, for instance, called by the DST director Marcel Chalet “the Solzhenitsyn of intelligence” in reference to the dissident Russian author who awared the world on Soviet violence.²²⁶ These expulsions led to a freeze in relations between the USSR and France that lasted for several years, which was also illustrated by a rise in a certain feeling of apprehension towards the other country, not only regarding Foreign Policy but internal affairs and crises as well. The media and the press contributed in both countries to feed this negative climate. As an example, the 2005 French riots in the Paris’ suburbs led to a high criticism of the French situation from a large part of the Russian media, albeit it had proved considerable concern among Russian people. While the Kremlin’s kept a low profile without officially commenting on these events, Russian journalists aimed to perceive the crisis as a form of “clash of civilisations”. This interpretation seemed to be favoured by Moscow and was certainly fuelled by a degree of animosity reproduced in the press of the two countries. French personalities had indeed strongly denounced the report made by the Russian media, while Russians’ main concern was the prospect of such events happening in their country. These misunderstandings illustrate the discomfort that may have prevailed in these years.²²⁷

1.4.Concluding Remarks and Economic Trends

To conclude, the USSR’s collapse could have put an end to this ideological and political opposition, but history has proved it did not. On the contrary, all these historical discords driven by a constant will to interfere in domestic affairs, have never really stopped until today’s crises. The controversy on the 2017 Presidential election suspicion of Russian interferences with hacking methods coming from Kremlin agencies, has proved it again very recently. Franco-

²²⁵ Florence Dartois, “5 Avril 1983: La France Expulse 47 Diplomates Russes Soupçonnés d’Espionnage, *INA*, April 5, 2022.

²²⁶ Sergueï Kostine, “Préface Du Bonjour Farewell,” in *Adieu Farewell: La Vérité Sur La Taupe Qui a Modifié Le Cours de L’histoire*, Éric Reynaud, (Groupe Robert Laffont, 2011), 9-23.

²²⁷ Jean-Christophe Romer, “Les Relations Franco-Russes de 2000 à 2006”, *Centre Thucydide*, March 18, 2008.

Russian relations resulted therefore in an alternation of warm and cool episodes, and although it is true that the dialogue never came to a complete halt, bonds were gradually degraded, with repercussions in all areas of cooperation. In contrast, one factor has been historically stable regarding the connection between France and Russia: both countries have always prioritised their national interests above any desire for rapprochement, and this has inevitably led to numerous occasions for deteriorating the relationship.

Furthermore, this trend is confirmed by the decreasing commercial cooperation during the decade that followed. Contrary to other periods where cooperations on different aspects, such as economics or culture, maintained their level, the 1980s witnessed direct consequences of this rough patch concerning Franco-Russian relations. For instance, in 1992, France was ranked 9th foreign investors in terms of the number of joint ventures, with only 90 companies, far behind other western powers such as the United States (398), Germany (373), or even Italy (198) and the UK (122). In terms of capital invested, France was the 6th largest foreign investor with 500 million rubles (₽), once again lagging far behind the US (11 billion) and its two European neighbors (around 1 billion for both Italy and Germany).²²⁸

²²⁸ Claude Estier, *op.cit.*

2. National Interest and the Relevance of European Stance

*“Pacifism is in the West and Euromissiles are in the East.
I believe that this is an unbalanced relationship.”* ²²⁹

François Mitterrand, on Russia’s Foreign Policy, 1983

*“We believe that we have the duty to pursue a genuine long-term policy,
both Franco-Russian and, more importantly, Euro-Russian policy, because it is
in our interests, but at the same time we must clearly state what we need to
expect from the Russians.”* ²³⁰

Hubert Védrine, J. Chirac’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2000

2.1.Introductory Preamble

At different periods, French national interest has put the country in total opposition to Russia, impacting at different degrees the relationship between the two. On the contrary, it also happened frequently that France attempted a rapprochement towards Russia, as the first chapter of the thesis had proved. However, this Foreign Policy orientation has not been initiated to cultivate a “privileged relation”, but, first and foremost, to satisfy its own national interest. Indeed, many examples in the history of Franco-Russian relations have illustrated this will to cooperate and agree with Moscow in order to take advantage of a diplomatic situation, and/or to limit damages of previous mistakes on the international scene. French foreign policy stance has therefore been following its nation-state priorities and objectives, as one could perfectly relate this diplomacy’s attitude to the German concept of Realpolitik. This theory has been defined by many scholars and applied to numerous practical cases since its origins, sometimes maybe widespreading the idea without clear explanations. Henry C. Emery analysed it as the confrontation between political realism and political idealism. ²³¹ John Bew updated the notion,

²²⁹ François Mitterrand, “Discours du Président de La République Lors Du Dîner Offert Au Palais Royal de Bruxelles Par LL. MM. Le Roi et La Reine Des Belges, Notamment Sur La CEE, Les Euromissiles et Le Désarmement”, October 12, 1983.

²³⁰ Hubert Védrine, “Déclaration du Ministre Des Affaires Étrangères En Réponse à Des Questions d’Actualité Sur La Situation En Tchétchénie et Dans Les Balkans Notamment Au Kosovo, *Assemblée Nationale*, February 22, 2000.

²³¹ Henry C. Emery, “What Is Realpolitik?”, *International Journal of Ethics* 25, no. 4, 1915, 448–68.

observing its development from its German dark roots to the Anglo-Saxon foreign policy adaptation. In 2016, William A. Hay interpreted these evidence by providing a comprehensive definition: *“Realpolitik is sometimes signals as a practical approach focused on the concrete particulars that shape international relations but either as an effort to cut through naivety and utopianism. More often, however, it conjures a very different image of cynically pursuing advantage by deploying power without moral restraint.”*²³²

This section will therefore emphasise these two axes where France apparently appropriates Realpolitik in its relationship with Russia: first, when Paris sought to get closer to Moscow, constantly taking into account its primary interests; and subsequently, when France did not hesitate to distance itself from Russia when these interests were jeopardised. The two directions seemed to be paradoxical but actually validated in both cases, the relevance of national interests. After consideration, it is worth mentioning different examples of diplomatic initiatives by shedding light on diverse historical moments.

2.2.Rapprochement Driven by Necessity

At the end of the 19th century, the Franco-Russian Alliance served a vital interest for France, which in 1870 had been defeated by Prussia, and was still paying it the heavy price. Thus, by using the rapprochement with Russia, French diplomacy gambled on containing the ambitions and the claims of its Prussian enemy. In fact, this trend can be generally observed over several centuries: while major European powers - i.e. Prussia, Austria-Hungary, Lithuania-Poland Kingdom, or the Ottoman Empire - gradually gained importance, Franco-Russian relations usually always improved significantly, and vice versa. The diplomatic ties between France and Russia depended therefore greatly on the relations they maintained with other great empires of the time. From this perspective, the 1893 Franco-Russian Alliance can be considered a clear response to the Triple Alliance signed a few years earlier by Austria-Hungary, Germany and Italy, which had left France isolated in Europe and Russia threatened by this imbalance. The interests of the two nations consequently converged in case of an attack. With that in mind, the true motivations of the Franco-Russian alliance can therefore be seen as almost “vital” and

²³² William Anthony Hay, “Understanding Realpolitik”, *Law & Liberty*, April 1, 2016.

“necessary”, breaking the myth of a “natural union” founded on deep friendship and real entente. The Reinsurance Treaty, which had been secretly concluded by Tsar Alexander III and the German Empire six years earlier, in 1887, certainly confirms this idea. The French Foreign Minister Gabriel Hanotaux had indeed clearly expressed this imperative character at the time: *“Whether they aimed to or not, Russia and France were thrown into each other’s arms. Since they were exposed to the same peril, they had no other resource than mutual guarantee. They indeed offered one to another, in the most complete manner possible.”*²³³

When Charles de Gaulle visited Moscow in December 1944, to negotiate with J. Stalin the treaty preparing the afterwar, he skilfully referred to the relative outcomes of this Franco-Russian Alliance, which he even described as a *“misadventure suffered for 30 years and fuelled by communist propaganda”*.²³⁴ During this trip, the Free France’s leader reached a significant peace agreement with Moscow, whereby the two countries agreed to support each other in the case of further German aggression. France could not ignore the USSR due to their decisive contribution to the victory, orienting therefore its foreign policy on dialogue. This new direction had surely granted France positive consequences, yet the alliance was mainly strategic for Russia as well. In his memoirs, General de Gaulle gave a detailed description of the atmosphere surrounding the signing of the pact, in which a large number of diplomats from both sides participated. He wrote in this regard: *“Stalin raised his glass in honour of France, whose leaders were now considered resolute and uncompromising. He wished our nation to be great and powerful because Russia needed a great and powerful ally”*.²³⁵

Hence, once again, this precious testimony reveals the imperious nature of Russia’s motivations in seeking this agreement, obtained after more than fifteen hours of talks, far from the narrative of the almost “spontaneous understanding” between two “privileged friends”. Moreover, this diplomatic endeavour did not completely satisfy the French side, de Gaulle being unable to prevent the establishment of pro-Soviet communists in Poland, which had always been his long-standing ally. If the French President could have been proud for refusing to support the Lublin Committee (PKWN) as Stalin requested him, de Gaulle was forced to accept this demand less

²³³ Romain Yakemtchouk, “Une Alliance Franco-Russe” in *La France et La Russie. Alliances et Discordances* (Editions L’Harmattan, 2011), 65–80.

²³⁴ Charles De Gaulle, “Le rang” in *Mémoires de Guerre*, Vol. III, (Editions Plon, 1959), 60–80

²³⁵ *Ibidem*.

than one year later. Thus, in June 1945, France became the first country to officially recognise the Communist government of Poland - state for which Paris had declared war in 1939.²³⁶

In 1966, General de Gaulle's visit to the USSR perfectly embodied this idea since his visit aimed to step up the process of "détente, entente, and cooperation", based on what he considered as long-standing and rational analysis of nations interests, which goes beyond any ideological difference. With the aim of building a European solidarity, launching his policy towards the East, some scholars had usually referred to this trip to put forward the French President's famous statement "Europe, from the Atlantic to the Urals". Actually, he never pronounced this expression as such, but by so often repeating these two concepts when talking about Europe, people frequently attributed him this form. Indeed, already in 1944, Moscow was included in his vision of Europe as well as in many of his further speeches (i.e. November 1953, April 1954, December 1958, May 1959, etc.).²³⁷

In 1966, he was therefore convinced of this vision for a long time, but how should it be interpreted? At least one thing is clear for the founder of the Fifth Republic, Europe was not ending at the borders of the Common Market. He believed in Europe as defined by geographers and historians, who had fixed its eastern boundary at the Ural Mountains. These borders could have certainly been open to debate, yet General de Gaulle has always been convinced that the USSR - at least a part of it - belonged to the European continent, he was willing to rebuild. He was supporting a European Confederation to ensure peace, including Russia as a leverage for balancing. This goal didn't change over time, and it never had the purpose to draw total opposition to the American bloc and Western allies' France was belonging through NATO.

Moreover, the concrete realisation of this policy has proven not to be so simple. Although rapprochement did occur with multiple cooperations in various areas and true convergence on many international issues (cf. chapter 1), the consensus on other crises was much more difficult to reach. The USSR frequently reversed some of the positions it had adopted contradicting the seemingly "cordial entente" by revealing deep-seated rivalries. For instance, the Vietnamese (1964) and Arab Israeli (1967) crises make this phenomenon very clear by initially bringing the two countries closer together, but ending drift apart, their foreign policies being driven by

²³⁶ Chantal Morelle, "Charles de Gaulle et La Pologne 1919-1969", *La Revue Défense Nationale*, Revue n°836, (Comité d'études de défense nationale, 2021), 99-104.

²³⁷ General Gambiez, "General de Gaulle, 'l'Europe de l'Atlantique à L'Oural'", *La Nouvelle Revue Des Deux Mondes*, November 1981, 289-300.

conflicting motivations. C. de Gaulle gave an interesting explanation on one of these issues: “*We were led to take a similar stance to that of the Soviets for different reasons. Our policy is to maintain good relations with the Arab countries, in order that they do not have good relations only with the Soviets*”.²³⁸

For him, France represented a middle path between the two blocs, whose policies and strategies were more radical. France’s more moderate position was therefore arguing that the Third World needed to escape from choosing one of the dominations imposed by the two superpowers. This approach was thus subtler and much more different from a concrete alignment with Russia, often too simply analysed by commentators at the time. In fact, during this period, the rivalry over the two regions was played out mainly between France and the Soviet Union, as the United States had lost influence both in Asia and in the Middle East. As a result, although the adoption of these aligned positions may have justified the rapprochement developed since 1965 even under heavy criticism from other countries, this policy has only been partially achieved, with many differences of opinion persisting. Moreover, as it has been demonstrated earlier, any moves towards greater relations were justified solely and above all by a community of sovereign interests and strategic influence on the international stage.²³⁹

Great dissension arose above all over European issues, severely contradicting the official statements. If the French and Soviet states could have found common ground on the German question, several events prevented a full alignment, leading both powers to be disappointed by incomplete coordination. For the USSR, France’s lack of support for its European Security and Cooperation Conference project provides one example. On the French side, this rationale had been illustrated by the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, which seriously hampered the process of dialogue opposing two irreconcilable visions. This coup triggered a clear reorientation of French diplomacy towards the Western block, to which the government of the time was fully committed, convinced of the common defence of the “free world” from the Soviet Union, from which it was, on the contrary, distancing itself. The aftermath of the 1966 French President’s triumphant trip was therefore less euphoric.²⁴⁰ The European idea “from the Atlantic to the Urals” became thus much more complex, with a frequently widespread narrative deconstructed by influential and inescapable realities of national interest.

²³⁸ Jean Lacouture, “Le Souverain” in *De Gaulle*, Vol. III, (Editions Seuil, 1986), 500.

²³⁹ Marie-Pierre Rey, “1964-1969, l’Essor Des Relations Bilatérales à l’Ère Gaullienne,” in *La Tentation Du Rapprochement*, (Éditions de la Sorbonne, 1992), 31–68.

²⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

The historian Alexandre Jevakhoff puts it in his own words: “*A formula cannot summarise ten years of back and forth, of paths that have been opened but often immediately re-closed*”.²⁴¹

To summarise, the core of French Foreign Policy was resting on the pragmatism of understanding Europe as a key geographical and historical construct, taking into consideration its own interest. This strategy involved France being capable of dealing and dialoguing with Russia, a country that it was neither intelligent nor profitable to antagonize, also to counter the American hegemony, as demonstrated in the first chapter. C. De Gaulle had not invented a new theory, but he certainly gave the path to a traditional vision of Foreign Policy strategy, which remained prominent and active for a very long time within the French diplomatic class. Whether it was before, during or after the Second World War, or finally when he came back to power as President, C. de Gaulle has always considered that France’s interests required adopting a “Russian policy”. These interests have naturally evolved over the years and with changing circumstances, yet they were the driving force behind this rapprochement. The French Foreign Policy, just like the Soviet one, reflected these developments. Hence, the Gaullist vision of diplomatic management, similarly embodied by many of his successors who would pursue dialogue with Russia, has never been based on a blind and innocent rapprochement. According to Alexandre Jevakhoff, if Paris has always been willing to work with Moscow, this desire was absolutely conditioned to serve France’s interests as well as not renouncing the fundamental values on which the country was founded.²⁴²

2.3. Multiple Historical Oppositions

After 1945, the Cold War placed France and the USSR in two opposing camps. As just explained, even when de Gaulle was willing to initiate rapprochement with Moscow in order to gain independence, he never called into question his position on the West side, remaining faithful to his long-standing American ally. For the same reasons, during other moments of crisis, C. de Gaulle didn’t hesitate to turn his back on Russia, affirming the constancy of French diplomacy, which aligned with Western Foreign Policy with no qualms. This stance has clearly been illustrated by two main international crises in the early days of the Cold War.

²⁴¹ Jean Lebrun, “Le Vif de l’histoire : De Gaulle et La Russie,” *France Inter*, February 24, 2022.

²⁴² Alexandre Jevakhoff, *op. cit.*

Firstly, during the 1948 Berlin Blockade, where France supported the Western coalition despite its internal political divisions over the German question handling. Although Paris took little part in the massive airlift effort, French forces did manage to complete the refurbishment of Berlin-Tegel airport in less than four months. Stalin's trial of strength, aiming to prevent the rise of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), was therefore a failure and the Western powers saw in the birth of this new state, a symbolic victory. The 1947 change of majority in Parliament and the later appointment of Robert Schuman as Minister for Foreign Affairs completed this direction by definitely committing France to European and Atlantic policies in these years. Likewise, at the beginning of the 1960s, France gave its total support to the United States' posture. The second Berlin Crisis of 1961, symbolised by the construction of the Berlin Wall, was an opportunity for General de Gaulle to demonstrate his solidarity with J.F. Kennedy, while calling for the inevitable, but distant, German reunification.²⁴³ A few months earlier, during his New Year's address to French citizens, he openly condemned in this respect, the USSR's "colonizing" and "threatening" attitude, referring to the international situation.²⁴⁴ He was therefore less considering Russia while setting out grand ambitions for Europe. With the establishment of nuclear weapons, affirming its full independence, France did not want to engage in a policy of appeasement towards the USSR: although it opposed American hegemony, it equally disavowed Russian imperialism.

Furthermore, the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis has been another striking example, while tensions were at their peak, with Soviet missiles placed within the US reach zone. On this occasion, the French President was the first head of State to approve of American firmness. Like this crisis, the Russian interference in Eastern European countries could also be seen as a perfect illustration of two incompatible perceptions leading to a total deadlock. The Soviet attachment to the status quo inherited from 1944-45, with the defense of previously acquired positions, was completely contrasting with the French more dynamic vision. General de Gaulle's official visits to Poland (1967), Romania and West Germany (1968) have been symbols of this opposition. All these factors partly explained why, during these Cold War crises, France unconditionally supported the Americans vis à vis Soviet moves and provocative actions. Hence, French Foreign Policy towards the USSR cannot be dissociated from the relationship it shared with its American and European allies when it comes to analysing this period.

²⁴³ Jacques Bariéty, "La France et La Crise Internationale Du Blocus de Berlin", *Histoire, Économie et Société*, no. 13, 1994, 29-44.

²⁴⁴ Charles De Gaulle, "Voeux Pour l'Année 1961," *INA*, December 31, 1960.

The following decades of relations between France and Russia didn't escape this idea of "cordial entente" only when domestic interests were fully served - as the Realpolitik concept presented previously recommends - without fearing to adopt a reversal position to be coherent even if it means harming the relation. This stance was adopted by the successors of General de Gaulle in the presidency, with series of practical cases.

Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, for instance, reaffirmed France's attachment to NATO structures and to an independent national policy. However, in a spirit of the Gaullist tradition, he was willing to work with Moscow if it served France's interests, but without abandoning the fundamental values that have shaped his country. French foreign policy was therefore confronted with a significant dilemma.²⁴⁵ Indeed, many Russian dissidents from their regime were welcomed in France, and the vast majority of them received the support of public opinion. On a matter of fact, for his third official visit to France in 1977, Leonid Brezhnev experienced major protests. President d'Estaing also did not hesitate to oppose the USSR when the latter disagreed with French foreign policy, or the common policy goal shared with its allies. Several Franco-Russian disputes erupted during his term, often leading to serious consequences. The Afghan issue previously mentioned had been a prime example of it in 1979, with France firmly condemning Russian intervention to defend the communist army in Kabul. The French government received strong support from the public opinion but also the entirety of the political forces, which strongly denounced the Soviet action, except for the French Communist Party, maintaining its loyalty to Moscow.²⁴⁶

In May 1980, the French President met Leonid Brezhnev in Warsaw to discuss the matter, believing his counterpart to be open to his arguments, albeit negotiating de-escalation with firmness. In fact, a month later, a Soviet leader's telegram announced the partial withdrawal of Russian troops, suggesting that France's views had been heard. At the following G7 meeting in Venice, the French President received recognition of his diplomatic achievement from the other countries. The success only lasted a little time, Western countries realizing that this manoeuvre was nothing but propaganda, not a single Russian soldier being withdrawn from Afghan soil. Finally, not only did his commitment go unfulfilled, but the Red Army's strength even increased significantly in the space of a few months. The failure of this diplomatic initiative

²⁴⁵ Claire Tessier, "Les Relations Franco-Soviétiques Au Début Du Septennat de Valéry Giscard d'Estaing 1974-1978" in *La France et La Russie: Regards Diplomatiques (XVII-XXIe Siècles)*, (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2012), 93-106.

²⁴⁶ Le Monde, "Le PCF et l'Intervention Soviétique En Afghanistan L'Humanité Reproche à M. Le Pors d'Attaquer Son Parti", *Le Monde*, November 7, 1989.

was thus further characterised by a stinging humiliation of the French diplomacy, which did nothing to improve relations with Russia. The “privileged” relationship had therefore proved here its limits, despite the friendly ties between the two Heads of State.²⁴⁷ This diplomatic incident even had domestic political repercussions, with the opposition to the French government - embodied by François Mitterrand - using it to ferociously criticize the management of the crisis. During the 1980 presidential campaign, the latter - who was elected president - built his arguments on contesting Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s foreign policy, which he even mischievously described as “*the Kremlin’s little telegrapher*”.²⁴⁸ Russian didn’t appreciate this stance, and the daily *Pravda* took even sides in the internal affair, denouncing the Socialist candidate in both ballots.

Once François Mitterrand had been elected, he implemented this hard-line stance towards Russia in his foreign policy. As a consequence, various summits and regular meetings that had been held between the two countries for a while were quickly suspended. In addition to the situation in Afghanistan, he condemned the installation of Soviet missiles in Europe, and in 1981 the Russians took a dim view of the French President’s support for the deployment of American fuses in the same area, albeit French positions on NATO were stable. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Claude Cheysson, even conditioned the return of good relations with Moscow on the complete withdrawal of Russian troops from Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the internal political crisis in Poland further accentuated the ongoing clash, with France claiming the right of Polish people to protest and supporting rights of the *Solidarność* trade union.²⁴⁹ Paris nonetheless opposed the sanctions imposed by the United-States on Russia, pledging to maintain coherence with its European neighbours, Germany first and foremost.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁷ Romain Yakemtchouk, “Les Présidences de Pompidou et de Giscard d’Estaing” in *La France et La Russie. Alliances et Discordances* (Editions L’Harmattan, 2011), 178–180.

²⁴⁸ Gérard Courtois, “16 Mars 1981: Le Jour Où Mitterrand a Fait Tapis à Cartes Sur Table”, *Histoire Contemporaine, France Culture*, March 7, 2022.

²⁴⁹ Claude Cheysson, “Discours du Ministre Des Relations Extérieures, Sur La Situation En Pologne, à La Conférence de Madrid, February 12, 1982.

²⁵⁰ Romain Yakemtchouk, “La Présidence de Mitterrand. La Perestroïka de Gorbatchev,” in *La France et La Russie. Alliances et Discordances* (Editions L’Harmattan, 2011), 181–200.

2.4. Contemporary European Balances

With the multiple espionage cases resulting in constant diplomats' expulsions - mentioned in the first part - as well as other bilateral incidents such as the kidnapping of a French public TV journalist captured in Kabul, this situation of tensions didn't improve either under Y. Andropov, nor under K. Chernenko. After not officially visiting Russia for five years, François Mitterrand went to Moscow in 1984 in an attempt to ease tensions with the Kremlin, which was deploring France's abandonment of its independent Gaullist policy. The period of diplomatic cold only changed concretely with the arrival of Michail Gorbachev a year later, marking a new direction in Soviet foreign policy. France welcomed *perestroika* and *glasnost* policies and more generally the democratisation that the new Soviet leader tried to implement. However, Paris kept a close eye on certain issues, such as the First Chechen War in 1995, at the very end of Mitterrand's presidency, which he condemned in the strongest terms. More generally, Russia's methods of settling issues or conflicts – whether internal or not - have often been problematical for French governments. Also, Paris was continuing to mainly emphasise on Moscow's incompatibility with democratic values and human rights. Conversely, Russian diplomats adopted the same language a few years later, when challenging NATO's intervention in the Balkans to stop the ongoing wars that followed Yugoslavia's breakup (1995-99).²⁵¹

Furthermore, on the cultural level, it is true that many contracts have been concluded, leading to various partnerships and exchanges renewed by the successive Presidents. In this respect, France was still enjoying a very good reputation in Russia for its culture and language. Yet it would be incorrect to assume that this position was totally exclusive, Germany, in fact, largely dominated these flows. In the 1980s, over 13 million Russians were learning German, compared to only 3 million studying French. In the opposite ratio at the same time, Germans were more likely to be learning Russian than French, although the gap was less significant in this case.²⁵²

Finally, even if Jacques Chirac's years at Elysée have been frequently presented as one of the most appeased phases in Franco-Russian relations, it is particularly interesting to note that the Realpolitik concept can be applied in the same way to the proclaimed Gaullist

²⁵¹ Romain Yakemtchouk, "L'éclatement de l'URSS. La Fédération de Russie. Eltsine Au Pouvoir," in *La France et La Russie. Alliances et Discordances* (Editions L'Harmattan, 2011), 201–29.

²⁵² Romain Yakemtchouk, "Les Présidences de Pompidou et de Giscard d'Estaing" in *La France et La Russie. Alliances et Discordances* (Editions L'Harmattan, 2011), 163–78.

successor's foreign policy. In a fascinating article, the scholar David Cadier analysed French Foreign Policy during this period. If Paris committed a rapprochement with Moscow in the early 2000s, it was guided essentially by France's interests rather than by the preservation of a privileged relationship. In particular, the author explored the notion of "milieu goals", which merely describes a "state's objectives and endeavours" in order for this state to manage its environment and the countries it is related to. In this respect, he demonstrated that in most cases: *"France's broader milieu goals in international and European politics have played a decisive role in driving its policies towards Russia"*.²⁵³

In the light of this explanation, the alignment of French diplomacy with Russian positions on various international crises reflected these objectives. Following President de Gaulle's footsteps - as the thesis' first chapter discussed - J. Chirac's foreign policy aimed to establish a strong and independent Europe in which Paris had a central place, granting France the role of a powerful leader on the world stage. This policy was therefore inevitably involving an autonomous emancipation from any external hegemony, whether based on the bipolar world of the past Cold War, or on the new world configuration that followed, i.e., unipolar and American. To counterbalance the latter, France perceived that closer ties and partnership with Russia were a strategic means to promote a multipolar world. Thus, Europe's independence from American influence was still, at that time, considered to be of primary interest to French diplomacy.²⁵⁴ Moreover, this theory is further reinforced by the fact that Germany was sharing this strategy, affecting therefore directly the tripartite axis, which had followed the exact same Realpolitik logic. Indeed, before reaching an agreement and officialising the alliance, Paris, Berlin and Moscow were defending all three their proper interest at the international level.

The Iraqi war discussed in thesis' first chapter provides a perfect example. Certainly, the result ended up with a common agreement opposing the military intervention led by the US and giving the impression of a powerful stance of three important countries allying, but this unity was absolutely not evident at the early stage of the crisis. Indeed, to reach an acceptable deal, Russia, France and Germany went through protracted negotiations and heavy compromises. Underneath the great official speeches' rhetoric, the mediation had been anything but simple and was also driven by proper national interest. Moreover, notwithstanding the deal, Russia had the necessity of maintaining good relations with the US, needing this reattachment

²⁵³ David Cadier, "Continuity and Change in France's Policies towards Russia: A Milieu Goals Explanation" *International Affairs* 94, no. 6, November 1, 2018, 1349–69.

²⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

to the Old Continent to be also determined by renewed relations with Washington. In fact, even afterwards, when the Russian President was asked about the existence of a “strategic partnership”, he remained extremely cautious, framing this alliance in the context of UN debates. On the other side, Europe was still defending a strategic autonomy by refusing the unipolar world suggested by Washington. The leading countries of the Old Continent - which France and Germany were the main actors - understood that they needed Russia to achieve this goal of building a genuine pole of autonomous powers.²⁵⁵

Additionally, the Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis was playing an economic and influential role in order to have the capacity to defend a certain number of values, considering the Kremlin as potentially receptive to the democratic path for Russia. The alliance benefited both sides at a given moment when the international situation presented an opportunity to satisfy specific concerns, and, no matter how relevant and logical this rapprochement may have been, its function must not be overestimated. The political scientist Jean-Christophe Romer perfectly encapsulated this idea: “*Make no mistake: this triangle appears to be more cyclical than structural, with each side defending its own interests which, may be close, but are definitely not the same, at least at the start of the crisis*”.²⁵⁶

Furthermore, the short-lived nature of this alliance shows that the negotiations achieved between the three countries have not been so fruitful for EU-Russia relations more widely, even though they were based on a rationale that transcended the strictly bilateral framework. Thus, although Jacques Chirac’s figure may have brought Russia closer through the sympathy Vladimir Putin felt about him, the practical outcome of this period is far from being positive. According to Jean-Christophe Romer, whatever the multilateral or contextual issue, Paris and Moscow never really managed to rely upon each other in defending their positions in the very beginning of the 21st century. This reinforced the idea that both countries were following their own interests and not acting in the name of a special and privileged relationship. If these types of declarations or friendly meetings had occurred, they were extremely rarely followed by tangible political developments. The war in Kosovo, and more generally NATO enlargements or interventions provided a good example of this mechanism, as while they all generated France’s effort and will to understand Russia’s concerns, they never actually resulted in opposing these decisions within NATO.

²⁵⁵ Jean-Christophe Romer, *op.cit.*

²⁵⁶ *Ibidem.*

David Cadier's comments on the matter are preciously insightful: "*Chirac's policy of engagement towards Russia was largely declaratory and often less than completely fulfilled. France's halfway approach also reveals that it saw its relationship with Moscow largely as 'a means to an end'*".²⁵⁷

Moreover, friction has also crystallized around human rights questions that France was continuing to be concerned about. This has been the case during the second war of Chechnya, where the Russian army intervened in 1999 to regain control over its North Caucasus territory, causing massive civilian deaths - estimated between 10% and 25% of the total population - and unprecedented damage. Here again, the heavy-handed methods employed by Moscow to manage this internal crisis were widely contested by the international community, shocked as a whole. France was the first European country to react, realizing that the situation was directly tarnishing its relationship with Russia. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hubert Védrine, condemned these acts in the strongest possible terms, even using a threatening tone when he addressed the relationship between the two countries: "*If Russia persists in its mistake, the result will be that step by step, there will be a rift between the different aspects of our relationship, hampering various issues.*"²⁵⁸

Likewise, it is worth noting that during this period, even though Franco-Russian cooperation lasted and even developed in theory, the reality was far less concrete when looking at the statistics of that time. In fact, in 2002, Russia only accounted for 0.9% of total French exports, and France was only Russia's tenth major partner, outstripped by all its Western European neighbours, and confirming that trade and economic exchanges were anything but a positive point in the France-Russia relationship.²⁵⁹

To conclude, as the first chapter of the thesis has proved, Paris was "historically" - more than other Western capitals - in favour of a constructive foreign policy towards Russia for two main reasons. Firstly, French political elites were still sensitive to the idea of a Russian "sphere of influence", and secondly, they were also critical of Washington's agenda on democracy

²⁵⁷ David Cadier, *op.cit.*

²⁵⁸ Hubert Védrine, "Conférence de Presse de M. Hubert Védrine, Sur l'Attitude Russe Dans Le Conflit En Tchétchénie, Le Rôle Du Conseil des Affaires Générales, La Constitution d'Une Force de Réaction Rapide Européenne et Son Positionnement Par Rapport à l'Otan, Sur l'Évolution de La Situation En Serbie et Dans Les Balkans, Sur Le Dossier Du Boeuf Britannique et Sur Les Relations Des Etats-Unis Avec Le Reste Du Monde", Paris, November 16, 1999.

²⁵⁹ Romain Yakemtchouk, "L'écèlement de l'URSS. La Fédération de Russie. Eltsine Au Pouvoir," in *La France et La Russie. Alliances et Discordances* (Editions L'Harmattan, 2011), 201-29.

promotion and interference. During the very beginning of the 21st century, these two logics found some limits within French diplomacy. The traditional support for the Russian regime started to be considered negatively, having more costs than benefits, and not satisfying national interests anymore. This disillusion contributed to increase the desire for a change in French Foreign Policy regarding Russia. In this regard, the analyst Thomas Gomart commented in 2007: “*Paris, like other Western capitals, is faced with the difficulty of building a strategic partnership with a regime that is unpredictable, unavoidable, and unreceptive to foreign advice.*”²⁶⁰

France began therefore to seriously feel this lack of potential shared interests, which resulted in a gradual distance between the two countries, and this trend gained momentum in Franco-Russian relations particularly after the departure of Jacques Chirac.

²⁶⁰ Thomas Gomart, “France’s Russia Policy: Balancing Interests and Values”, *The Washington Quarterly*, 2007, 147-55.

3. The Slow Metamorphosis of Foreign Policy and the Decline of Relations with Russia

*“Let us tell things as they really are: there is growing distrust between the European Union and Russia.”*²⁶¹

Nicolas Sarkozy, 2009

*“Russia cannot, at the same time, aspire to be a recognised 21st-century power and disregard the rules that come with it.”*²⁶²

François Hollande, in his Foreign Policy Speech, 2014

3.1. The Obstacles Faced by Nicolas Sarkozy

The period following Nicolas Sarkozy's election reflects the continuity of France's foreign policy towards Russia in the rupture that it was already taking previously. The dialogue did not cease, but the stance became increasingly critical in many aspects, disputing always more the French traditional line. It has been proven in the two preceding parts that even under General de Gaulle and his successors, the relation with Russia has never been so privileged, going on only for satisfying national interests. In this respect, the French desire to pursue an independent foreign policy, obtaining balance through dialogue with Moscow, has fueled this narrative. The cordial relations between both parts' Presidents had further reinforced this stance. From 2007, these two points became considerably less evident, and were unable to cope with the far more contrasting reality of Franco-Russian relations. In this respect, the controversy on the very first meeting between N. Sarkozy and Vladimir Putin is one of the best illustrations of this shifting atmosphere.

The freshly elected French President attended the Heiligendamm G8 summit in Germany, less than a month after his victory. While he had not been reserved in his criticism of Russia during his campaign, he continued on the same path, adopting a fairly muscular

²⁶¹ Nicolas Sarkozy, “Déclaration du Président de La République, Sur l'OTAN, Les Relations Euro-Russes et Sur La Défense Européenne”, Munich, February 7, 2009.

²⁶² François Hollande, “Discours du Président de La République”, *Conférence Des Ambassadeurs*, August 28, 2014.

approach during their first private meeting. Several sensitive issues were put on the table, including Chechnya, gay rights and the murder of Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya. When the French Head of State came out alone for the press conference, he was apparently in an abnormal state of discomfort. No one knew at the time, the reason for N. Sarkozy's distraught attitude, the journalists even assuming he was drunk. Doubt lingered for a while, as the only people present at the meeting were their respective diplomatic advisers and translators. None of the presidents ever commented on the event. Yet, in an investigative book published in 2016, the French journalist Nicolas Hénin revealed the content of the harsh discussion.²⁶³ In a highly threatening tone, V. Putin has been alleged to have ordered Mr. Sarkozy to change immediately his line, and miming with a gesture the difference of size between France and Russia, he was even quoted as saying: *"Either you continue in this tone, and I'll crush you, or you change your tune, and I can make you the king of Europe"*. The words seem astonishing, and although it is impossible to ascertain their veracity - one of the diplomatic advisers has formally denied them - the journalist's revelations reflect quite accurately the new climate of tension that has developed between the two Presidents from the outset.²⁶⁴

The decline in cordiality and willingness to drive an independent Foreign Policy worsened over time and therefore played a significant role in the deterioration of these relations, suffering also greatly from the widening gap of the two countries' national interests. The early stages of Nicolas Sarkozy's term have consequently been marked by a contrasting approach to Russian policy. By reintegrating NATO's military command structure (NCS), the French President was clearly breaking with the Gaullist tradition, which had always advocated independence from the United States. This pro-Atlanticist stance disappointed Moscow, distancing de facto Paris from the Russian administration inner circle. At his first annual conference with the diplomatic corps, N. Sarkozy declared without political cant: *"Russia is asserting its comeback to the global stage by wielding its assets – particularly oil and gas – with a certain degree of brutality, at the time when the world, and Europe especially, expect from it to contribute significantly and positively to resolving the problems of our time, as its renewed status would warrant."*²⁶⁵

²⁶³ Nicolas Hénin, "La France Russe : Enquête Sur Les Réseaux Poutine," *Secrets d'Info, France Inter*, June 10, 2016.

²⁶⁴ Arnaud Focraud, "Versions Contradictoires Sur 'L'humiliation' de Sarkozy Par Poutine En 2007", *Le Journal Du Dimanche*, December 19, 2016.

²⁶⁵ Nicolas Sarkozy, "Discours du Président de la République", *Conférence Des Ambassadeurs*, August 27, 2007.

At the same time, the French Foreign Minister, Bernard Kouchner, expressed its disagreements over the Kosovo question while visiting Moscow to discuss with his counterpart Sergey Lavrov. Paris was changing its strategy, which until now had been of maintaining friendly bilateral relations, exploiting the myth of the “privileged relationship” shared historically between the two countries, despite deep differences. This willingness to call into question this previous strategy deteriorated Franco-Russian relations quasi automatically. Russia indeed did not appreciate this turnaround in foreign policy, and the 2005 EU referendum results in France added during these years, another element of discord that it is important to mention. In fact, the Kremlin was feeling great discomfort regarding the French “no” to the European Constitution, as this could directly block good relations between Russia and the EU. This reaction revealed further decline of bilateral relations, which no longer had any real weight, as it was assessed only through the prism of multilateral relations in which other European powers were equally involved. This striking point proves again the fact that, as early as 2005, the privileged relationship between France and Russia - if it ever truly existed - was starting seriously to belong to the past.²⁶⁶

However, his government was seeking to avoid any verbal confrontation, on the other hand, N. Sarkozy did not want to fall into “complacency”, which had often been associated by commentators with Jacques Chirac’s Russian policy. The aim was therefore to achieve a more effective articulation of Franco-Russian relations, notably within the EU-Russia dialogue, but being this time inflexible on Russia’s moves and behaviour. The French President’s foreign policy had been called in this respect a “rational reversal”, given that some particular factors would remain unaffected by the harder line he suggested globally. Hence, France was trying to act in a spirit of Realpolitik, not affecting its interests from the new official line, in this case, the economic dimension which was considered to be one of the most important sectors to preserve. As an example, France didn’t hide to accept a number of gas contracts proposed when Russia was in search of Western partners. In 2007, for instance, the French giant oil firm *Total* was awarded a 25% stake in a gas field in the Barents Sea. Many concrete examples of trade deals and increasing commercial developments, given in the first chapter, were totally in line with this logic. It is therefore worth noting here that the few remaining close relations were almost exclusively satisfying national interests.²⁶⁷ In this regard, traditionally critical of Russia,

²⁶⁶ Jean-Christophe Romer, *op.cit.*

²⁶⁷ Romain Yakemtchouk, “Nicolas Sarkozy à La Présidence de La République Française,” in *La France et La Russie. Alliances et Discordances* (Editions L’Harmattan, 2011), 229–40.

French Press was frequently presenting the relation as rested on the exclusive choice between the economic interest and the defence of values and democratic ideals, locking French foreign policy in a binary logic. The complexity of the Realpolitik features that French diplomacy was attempting to implement didn't correspond to this condensed vision of international relations. If at the time, Russia was undoubtedly hardening human rights and freedom conditions, the country was also developing its economy leading to the emergence of a strong middle class that was supporting V. Putin's policies willing to restore great status to its country.²⁶⁸

Furthermore, parts of specific examples emphasising moments of tight relations – some pictured in the thesis' first chapter - also need to be deconstructed. In this regard, looking back at 2008 Georgian situation, it is true that N. Sarkozy undertook negotiations in the name of the EU, calming tensions and effectively putting an end to the war. In the same line, a month earlier in Bucharest, France - together with Germany - opposed NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine. This stance was seen as crucial to ensure a long-standing peace with Russia, but the diplomatic game realities have been far more complex. Indeed, although French diplomacy remained extremely cautious about Tbilisi's and Kiev's "desire to join NATO", France was just as concerned about Russia's policy of influence in the former Soviet Union territories, playing with questionable methods such as frozen conflicts, energy pressure or trade wars. In that context, Russia's actions in Georgia's two separatist territories - South Ossetia and Abkhazia - in 2009 were considered to breach the 2008 Sarkozy-Medvedev-Saakashvili peace plan, which stipulated the return of troops to their pre-conflict positions. These violations, of course, didn't help to improve the Kremlin's image, and after its constant effort to bring back a stable peace in the region, Paris felt greatly disappointed. Moreover, during the same negotiations in Bucharest, Paris and Berlin were unable - or unwilling - to prevent that the NATO accession procedure would remain a "future perspective" for these two countries. Diplomats who were defending the traditional approach were, in this sense, not completely satisfied. The ex-Foreign Affairs' Commission President at the National Assembly, Elisabeth Guigou, was one of them. She considered then the Georgian invasion, and later the annexation of Crimea, were likely to be "*Russia's direct responses to these unnecessary provocations*".²⁶⁹

²⁶⁸ Elisabeth Guigou, "Enjeux Stratégiques Pour La France et L'Europe," *Revue Défense Nationale*, N° 801, June 1, 2017, 13–24.

²⁶⁹ Elisabeth Guigou, *op. cit.*

Although this Gaullist-realistic vision was still popular within intellectual circles, opinions were progressively shifting, in light of which both actions were unanimously condemned by French diplomacy. N. Sarkozy confirmed this stance a few years later, reiterating these points clearly while he was visiting Tbilisi. Addressing a speech to Georgian citizens, he declared in 2011: “*Georgia must be free to express its aspiration to join NATO, if its people wish to do so*”, before adding ironically and in an almost provocative tone towards Moscow: “*As far as I’m concerned, when I’m in Tbilisi, I feel like I’m in Europe and not somewhere else!*”. The rupture from the Franco-German mindset of the 2008 Bucharest NATO summit was striking; this time, the French President stood alone, likely aiming to reach out to the Atlanticist bloc or Eastern European countries.²⁷⁰

3.2. Consequences of the 2014 Events in Ukraine

Afterwards, and particularly after the repeated disputes over Ukrainian territories, differences of opinion accelerated with Moscow. For France, the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the destabilisation of eastern Ukraine by Russian-backed separatists constituted a serious breach of international law and a threat to Europe’s order and stability. Along with its European partners, the French government did not hesitate to advocate the application of sanctions against Russia, with the aim of obtaining the withdrawal of foreign armed forces from Ukrainian territory and the restoration of Kiev’s full sovereignty. These sanctions were a concrete leverage that European countries could jointly use with rapidity, and, if the efficiency had been discussed, it was at least the only way to show that the protest was not just verbal. Putting all the European partners on the same level, this crisis brought together a continent not easy to unify on certain issues. Crimea invasion had been therefore the catalyst of a feeling that was around for a while, in which EU-Russia relations had changed losing in trust and quality. Already in 2011, the expert Jana Kobzova was relating this degradation: “*Most EU member-states have adopted an agnostic attitude to Russia’s topsy-turvy domestic politics, and their focus in Russia is to win orders for business back home, often at the expense of other Europeans. As one European diplomat put it, ‘the EU is now dealing with Russia as it does with China’*”.²⁷¹

²⁷⁰ Nicolas Sarkozy, “Déclaration du Président de La République Sur Les Relations Entre La France et La Géorgie”, Tbilissi, October 7, 2011.

²⁷¹ Jana Kobzova, “The EU-Russia Summit: What Really Matters?”, *European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)*, June 6, 2011.

If France wasn't part of these faltering countries before, it was, in 2014, one of the drivers pushing for the implementation of the sanctions at the European level. In contrast to the Georgian war aftermath, France has been clear this time in its will to punish and contradict the Russian stance. With this important compromise between the members, the EU has been able to preserve its cohesion and to show Eurasian unity. As immediate consequences, Russia fell from 4th to 10th place among France's markets between 2014 and 2015, with trade down 35%, due both to a drop in French exports to Russia (-33.2%) and a drop in French purchases of Russian products (-36.5%), albeit these trends were also partly linked to the fall in the price of oil. European sanctions had therefore a direct impact on the economic relations in multiple fields such as energy, banking, arms and dual-use goods. In general, the volume of mutual trade dropped more than twofold, falling from a peak of \$28.1 billion in 2011 to \$13.3 billion in 2016. That same year, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs was, in this respect, highly concerned for the future of bilateral trade relations, mentioning specifically the situation in Ukraine as "*a lasting situation of unpredictability and deteriorating confidence*" and its consequences, believing that "*French companies could suffer long-term market losses as Russia turns to other producing countries in reaction to Western sanctions*".²⁷² A report from the French Senate stressed in 2018 that relations in the economic sphere were "*dependent on a full restoration of trust on the political level*" and that the lifting of sanctions were "*not only conditional on the resolution of the Ukrainian crisis but also implying Russia's compliance with its WTO commitments*".²⁷³

At the same time - as the first chapter explains it - F. Hollande and A. Merkel didn't spare their efforts to promote dialogue through the so-called Normandy Format in order to obtain a package of measures for the implementation of the Minsk agreements, which twice were closely to be adopted and stopped the conflict. The channel instituted by this format was a way for France to provide its support to Kiev, avoiding a direct head-on conflict and showing above all, its clear opposition to Moscow's policies. This mediation aimed indeed to achieve a fair settlement of the conflict by providing Ukraine with solid peace guarantees. Despite the willingness to engage in dialogue with the Kremlin, Paris never failed to make its position clear, a prime example of which were the sanctions against Moscow. Hence, France's involvement in

²⁷² Isabelle Facon, "La Relation France-Russie à L'épreuve", *Annuaire Français de Relations Internationales*, Vol. 15, Université Panthéon Assas, July 7, 2015.

²⁷³ Konstantin Kossatchev and Christian Cambon, "France-Russie: Dialogue Parlementaire Pour Rétablir La Confiance," *Sénat*, 2018.

the peace negotiations, rather than being motivated by its privileged relationship with Russia, was driven by the need to defend its interests, reflecting again the Realpolitik approach outlined in all the chapter. On the one hand, the foreign policy reversal towards Europe justified harmony in the continent and thus, a soonest end to this regional conflict. On the other hand, a part of French diplomacy was interpreting Russian violations as a direct threat to national security, giving an explanation for providing efforts and means for bringing back stability. In this respect, the Franco-German dynamic launched with the Normandy Format was a means to prove through a concrete case that France was a co-leader in the EU, and therefore an indispensable actor for managing crisis on its continent.²⁷⁴

Dispute raised therefore sharply as the Ukrainian dossier was evolving, breaking trust between both countries. Since its very beginning, France has opted - on almost every aspect of the crisis - to hold the same positions as its NATO and EU allies. In a common multilateral agreement, Paris has limited the political dialogue with Russia following the annexation of Crimea, further damaging bilateral relations. The historian Isabelle Facon insisted on that period marking a rupture in the Franco-Russian ties: *“Until recently, the political relationship between France and Russia was generally presented in positive terms by both sides which often saw the other as a useful ally in their respective rivalries with other players on the Old Continent. After 2014, the French line reflects a change of colour in the bilateral relationship, which has been gradually modified, normalised and, ultimately, banalised in recent years”*.²⁷⁵

This deterioration in relations also had political influences. The Mistral warships' delivery to Russia was cancelled and many high-level and interministerial meetings were impacted. To quote one concrete example, the Council for Franco-Russian Cooperation on Security Issues (CCSI), which brought together the foreign and defence ministers at least twice a year before 2014, came definitely to an end. These choices - far from being simple as they were having high costs – were however following French interests, as the strategy was supposed to be a winning wager, promoting Europe, and France's leadership within. Besides, the harsh discussions with the Russian authorities to terminate the Mistral contract followed the same pattern. The great compromise found between the two countries was not so due to their special bond. In fact, the reason behind this damage limitation was actually more related to a shared desire to avoid lengthy and costly legal proceedings. Additionally, France made concessions

²⁷⁴ David Cadier, *op. cit.*

²⁷⁵ Isabelle Facon, *op. cit.*

merely for its own interest to preserve its image, both as a reliable exporter in the defence sector, but also as a country that did not yield to external pressures.²⁷⁶

These changes were certainly explained by the gravity of the situation, which has led Russia to violate international law, but they were also probably a symptom of the weakening strategic convergence between Paris and Moscow over the last few years. This situation generally hampered political and security dialogue for Europe. The mutual impression of a gradual incomprehension between both countries contributed to this deterioration and gave progressively birth to the “Europeanisation of French foreign policy”, while a certain “Russian fatigue” was felt on the other side. All these factors combined to transform the idea of a privileged partnership with Moscow, expanding in the meantime Paris’s spectrum of diplomatic options, focusing on Europe as the Kremlin had become an embarrassing interlocutor. Laure Delcour accurately confirms the context at this time: “*Russia was definitely one of the most dividing issues in the European Union, which was the central vector of France’s foreign policy*”.²⁷⁷

3.3. Clashing Positions on the Syrian Crisis

In addition, the question of Syria has been another important international issue that crystallised the opposition to the Kremlin’s Foreign Policy during this period. This time external to Moscow, the crisis constituted a matter of deep disagreement with Paris due to Russia’s decisive support for the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad. The clash took on even greater significance when V. Putin decided to get directly involved in the civil war – which quickly shifted into a religious conflict pitting the Sunni majority against the Shiite minority in power - by intervening militarily from October 2015. This intervention was also coming as a shock since it was Russia’s first military intervention outside the post-Soviet space since 1991. With the emergence of different radical Islamist groups, the war acquired an international dimension. In this respect, the fight against Islamist terrorism in the region was a shared objective for France and Russia, but the visions and methods to deal with the issue were absolutely not aligned. On the other hand, Paris was also condemning the brutality of B. al-

²⁷⁶ David Cadier, *op. cit.*

²⁷⁷ Laure Delcour, “France-Russie: La Réinvention d’Une Relation Spécifique”, *DGA Panalyse Frankreich*, SSOAR, N°6, July, 2010.

Assad's repression of its people, including the use of chemical weapons and the obstruction of humanitarian aid delivery. The French government regretted in this regard the failure to conclude political negotiations and the vetoes placed by Russia at the UN Security Council vote on the adoption of resolutions to denounce the violence and war crimes against Sunni community. Besides, French diplomacy was concerned about the desire to dismantle the chemical weapons ban, and worried about its consequences. Both disagreed therefore on the role of the Syrian President, which in French view couldn't be "*the solution to the problem of which he is the cause*".

This crisis embodied more widely Russia's confrontational stance towards the West, fuelled by a certain virulence in the media's discourse. At the time, disinformation was starting to be an important cornerstone of the Russian strategy of influence, as well as electoral process' interferences in Western democracies. These two additional threats have been, for these reasons, a major cause of concern for European governments, prominently contributing to the deterioration of Franco-Russian relations during this period.²⁷⁸

Returning to the fight against terrorism, which was a common goal in the region, France had always considered that an alliance with Russia on the matter would have been more than profitable and useful for both parties. The first chapter of the thesis has shed light on talks for an agreement, which have been close to being reached, in the climate of fear and compassion that followed 2015 Paris' bloody attacks. However, both Foreign Policies had neither the same objectives nor the same strategies, making the alignment difficult. For example, Paris and Moscow didn't have the same conception of what a military action should be in such context. Therewith, Russia refused to take part in the battle of Mosul coalition, which was considered to be crucial in the fight against ISIS. On the field, the means that the Russian army was employing - broadly indiscriminate bombing harming civilians - were in total inconsistency with French and Western strategy of action. Thus, Franco-Russian and, more generally, Russian-Western differences hampered the realisation of this common project against Islamist terrorism.²⁷⁹ Under François Hollande's presidency, the Syrian question has therefore been at the centre of conversations between the two countries. The French President, who was expected to urge the Russian authorities to take action in response to the terrorism coalition, never succeeded in this mission. On his side, the Russian President was firmly convinced to continue

²⁷⁸ Konstantin Kossatchev and Christian Cambon, *op.cit.*

²⁷⁹ Anne de Tinguy, "Russie: La France En Quête de Paradigme", *Les Dossiers Du CERI*, 2017.

his back on Bashar Al Assad supports. The violence of the bombardments in the eastern part of Aleppo shelled by the Damascus regime and its Russian ally, only aggravated the situation. Finally, the diplomatic confrontation between France and Russia reached a climax at the last 2016 UNSC session, during which Moscow vetoed the French resolution on a ceasefire in Aleppo, which was supported by 11 of the 15 members of the council.²⁸⁰

Since the middle of F. Hollande's presidency, the Franco-Russian relationship has further tarnished dramatically. As a cause-and-effect circle, the traditional approach of rapprochement through dialogue with Moscow was no longer the reference for French diplomacy. In addition, the mistrust was ever-increasing due to Russia's strategy of influence, which combines disinformation, repeated cyber-attacks, and military gesticulations on the borders of NATO member countries.²⁸¹ In 2017, the French President insisted on the fact that Russian policy was contributing to the "*unstable, dangerous and uncertain world, with the deep upheavals*" that were shaping the international context. That's why he recommended transforming the relation into a "*dialogue of firmness*", conducted with the EU - and particularly Germany - which was supposed to give great emphasis on values and standards.

This new strategy to deal with Moscow has also been linked to Russia's growing isolation on the international stage, which may have prompted F. Hollande to be more hawkish. Hence, during this period, France was far removed from the attitude of listening and understanding that had encouraged almost empathically President Chirac to consider Russia's concerns. From 2014 onwards, it made no doubts that any question of a strategic partnership, great convergence, or privileged relations were no longer existing between the two states.²⁸²

²⁸⁰ United Nations, "Security Council Fails to Adopt Two Draft Resolutions on Syria, despite Appeals for Action Preventing Impending Humanitarian Catastrophe in Aleppo Meetings Coverage and Press Releases", *United Nations*, October 8, 2016.

²⁸¹ Anne de Tinguy, *op.cit.*

²⁸² François Hollande, "Déclaration du Président de La République Sur Les Défis et Priorités de La Politique Étrangère de La France", Paris, January 12, 2017.

3.4. Concluding Remarks

Of all the French presidents Vladimir Putin has known, it has been under F. Hollande that the relations have been the coldest. This statement is also well illustrated by the 2016 mini-diplomatic crisis when, fuelled by all the aforementioned tensions, V. Putin's official visit was cancelled. In fact, on the 19th of October, the Russian president was due to inaugurate the Holy Trinity Orthodox Cathedral of Paris, opening at the same time the related Russian Spiritual and Cultural Centre, built at the instigation of Nicolas Sarkozy. This visit, planned for months, had a strong cultural symbolism for the history of relations between the two countries, but F. Hollande - who was of course due to take part in the event - used this occasion to put pressure on the sensitive discussions on Syria, creating a huge quarrel. Only a few days beforehand, the Kremlin announced that V. Putin "*wished to postpone*" his visit to France until "*President Hollande felt comfortable with it*".²⁸³

To underline the disruptiveness of F. Hollande's foreign policy, it is worth mentioning that he was far from receiving a unanimous approval of the French political class. The Russian question was indeed becoming highly controversial and sparked intense debate during the 2017 presidential election. Between – and even within - political parties, the different visions of Russia's policy were opposing between the more antagonistic, which advocated an Atlanticist and European vision, and the neo-Gaullist which preconised a return to the traditional conception of Franco-Russian connections. Furthermore, Russian positions were being conveyed through a growing number of channels, and political leaders of the majority expressed their concern about the means used by Moscow to influence public opinion, and therefore possibly interfere in the electoral process. In an interview for the French daily *Le Monde*, François Hollande even called for "*vigilance*" on that topic, considering it necessary to "*unmask ideological operations*".²⁸⁴

In conclusion, first under N. Sarkozy, and lately even more with F. Hollande, a disruptive trend has emerged within the French executive, proving to be less inclined to strong political and security relations with Russia. The generational change among the political elites has played in this direction, leading to a general abandonment of the Gaullist tradition of foreign

²⁸³ Anne-Laure Frémont, "Vladimir Poutine Décide Finalement de Reporter Sa Visite En France", *Le Figaro*, October 11, 2016.

²⁸⁴ Benjamin Quénelle, "Hollande Appelle à La 'Vigilance' Face Aux Influences Russes", *Les Echos*, March 7, 2017.

policy. This change of allegiance directly impacted the strategy to adopt for managing the relation with Moscow, which had nothing “special” anymore. In the evolving context previously analysed, the new ruling class that composed French diplomacy was increasingly influenced by the European scope, and consequently in favour of taking the lead on its dual development, i.e. NATO and the European Union issues.²⁸⁵ On the eve of Emmanuel Macron’s presidency, it seemed certain that a page had already been turned in the entente between France and Russia. The 2022 invasion in Ukraine was probably the last nail in the coffin for these relations, experiencing then an unprecedented rupture. The French Foreign Policy’s shifting drastically from 2023 will be scrutinised in the third part of this chapter, suggesting a reflection on the future that could lie ahead for Franco-Russian dialogue. Beforehand, the limits of the “privileged relationship” continue to be examined through the study of Russian foreign policy dynamics and peculiarities.

²⁸⁵ Isabelle Facon, *op. cit.*

4. The French Policy Turnaround from 2022-2023

*“Today is very clearly not the time for dialogue, because we face a Russia which chose war, and which bears full responsibility for the calamitous effects this war is causing in the world.”*²⁸⁶

Emmanuel Macron, 2023

*“If someone wants to cover up their country’s internal problems with aggressive external rhetoric, well that’s a common and widely used trick, but I would like France not to play that role.”*²⁸⁷

Vladimir Putin, 2024

4.1. The Russian Invasion of Ukraine

On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, launching an unprecedented attack on the European soil since a very long time. The war is still lasting today, with a front line which had showed no significant change in three years, despite more than one million deaths or wounded, with at least 10 million displaced, making the territorial aggression in Ukraine actually the largest and bloodiest conflict since the Second World War.²⁸⁸ The first chapter had largely explained Emmanuel Macron’s last tentative of offering Europe a dialogue with Moscow, accompanied with his German counterpart, Olaf Scholz, both visiting Vladimir Putin few days before the invasion. Even during the first days and weeks of the conflict, France and Germany were putting lots of efforts to negotiate the end of the war in the soonest time. Despite their clear and complete support for Ukraine, but both still have tried to appease tensions, maintaining the line with the Kremlin for almost a year.

²⁸⁶ Emmanuel Macron, “Déclaration du Président de La République, Sur Le Conflit En Ukraine et La Défense Européenne, à Munich”, February, 17, 2023

²⁸⁷ Vladimir Putin, “Poutine Met La France En Garde,” *Anadolu Ajansi*, March, 18, 2024.

²⁸⁸ Bojan Pancevski, “One Million Are Now Dead or Injured in the Russia-Ukraine War,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 17, 2024.

Although, after the invasion, the French President spoke of the “courage to take historic decisions”²⁸⁹ to help Ukraine so that Russia could “never win”²⁹⁰, he seemed seemingly concerned about making peace. To achieve this aim, he believed for a long time that he could convince V. Putin with a deal, securing peace with Russia in the process. On May 2022, he declared in this sense not to “humiliate Russia” and even to consider the idea of a “European political community” in which Ukraine could have a place but concretely meaning that Kiev couldn’t candidate for EU or NATO membership.²⁹¹ Even after the Bucha massacre, which shocked the entire international community one month after the invasion, Paris continued its efforts to mediate with the Kremlin. Facing incomprehension from several partners, France argued that it didn’t want the situation to escalate after V. Putin’s threatening statements on nuclear issues. The fear of a potential nuclear conflict, plunging Europe into a continental war, was one of the reasons for this abrupt step backwards, which the French executive justified on the grounds of the defence of Europe’s vital interests. In any case, given the opposing visions and France’s denunciation of an “imperialist and outrageous aggression”, discussions with V. Putin proved largely unproductive. The last phone call between the two Presidents dated back on September 11, 2022, marking therefore a turning point after which the two nations ceased direct communication. Germany followed this initiative with greater caution regarding any concrete actions, remaining extremely attentive to the language used by its diplomacy on the matter.

The following sections will focus on the reversal of French foreign policy, focusing on the moment it drastically changed its approach to the crisis, and to Russia more broadly. Analysing this period lying between 2022 and 2023, this section draws on the work of various scholars to illustrate the rationale of French new strategic direction, embodying the leadership of the European support to Ukraine and resistance to Russia. This approach led to concrete decisions that had long-term repercussions and reveal how important the rupture has been between both countries. Thus, three striking ideas emerge from this shift and shed light on the evolution of French foreign policy. Firstly, France abandoned its traditional mediation role, stopping any dialogue with Moscow and leading to an unprecedented situation; then, this reversal has been fueled by new opportunities in Europe, satisfying therefore France’s national interest; finally,

²⁸⁹ Emmanuel Macron, “Déclaration du Président de La République, Sur l’Union Européenne Face Au Conflit En Ukraine et Ses Conséquences Pour La Construction Européenne, à Versailles”, March, 11, 2022.

²⁹⁰ Emmanuel Macron, “Déclaration du Président de La République, Sur La Construction Européenne et Le Conflit En Ukraine, à Strasbourg”, May, 9, 2022.

²⁹¹ *Ibidem*.

this reorientation led to landmark decisions representing a total breakdown with the past: France's support for Ukraine's bids to join NATO and EU and the end of the Franco-German alignment on the policy to adopt with Russia, prompting an interesting reorganisation in Europe.

4.2. The French Policy Reversal

At the start of his five-year term, Emmanuel Macron followed the footsteps of his predecessors by pursuing an ambivalent foreign policy on Russia. For instance, he was seeking to continue the “dialogue of firmness” that his predecessor had established, however at the same he was optimistic about a possible “reset” with Moscow. Oscillating between a pragmatic approach and a hardline, the French President's efforts didn't materialise, finding itself without the concrete results he had expected. According to the researcher Dimitri Minic, French diplomacy endeavours at the time were only symbolic, reflecting a certain futility and lack of experience and awareness on Russian behaviour. He commented in this regard: “*Emmanuel Macron surely underestimated the fragility and poor structural prospects of the Franco-Russian relationship, as well as the experience of his predecessors and Russia's political and strategic intentions and culture*”.²⁹²

Thus, guided by the myth of Franco-Russian privileged relation still present within French diplomacy, Emmanuel Macron appeared open to building a new security architecture that would include Russia and fulfill Paris' European ambitions. Yet, he simultaneously maintained pressure on Moscow by upholding sanctions and remaining firm on human rights values and principles. For French diplomacy, this new “European order” entailed balancing Russia's inclusion without abandoning security partnerships with NATO, which were not acceptable from the Russian perspective. This position drew sharp criticism from Central and Eastern European countries, whose strongly divergent views were, at the time, described by E. Macron as “warmongering” (cf. Press Review, Chap1,4.2). For France, this approach was also a strategy to limit Moscow's slide into Beijing's arms and defend Europe's autonomy and economy.

²⁹² Dimitri Minic, “La Politique Russe d'Emmanuel Macron: Étapes et Racines d'Une Nouvelle Approche, 2017-2024,” *Institut Français Des Relations Internationales*, April 23, 2024.

However, by the end of 2022, France's policy toward Russia experienced a significant transformation. Although this shift appeared sudden, shaking parts of French diplomacy, it occurred gradually, and the more serious and permanent the war became, the more E. Macron was changing its stance. The French President realised that persisting with an overly docile path with Russia would not yield results, which has also been quite limited in the past. Just after the invasion, Pierre Vimont's mission of good offices with Moscow was for example suspended. This distinguished diplomat had been appointed in 2019 by the French President to orchestrate the "reset" of relations with Russia and had begun his mission by running to capitals to reassure his EU partners, who E. Macron hadn't even warned.²⁹³ His statements throughout 2022 reflect a clear contrast with this period, embodying the shift of French approach to Moscow. From the French President's speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2022 to the Conference in support of Ukraine on February 2024, the French President has undergone a conversion, both in rhetoric and action. His support for Ukraine became clear-cut, considering this war to be existential for Europe and France, and having no qualms about denouncing its architect, Vladimir Putin. The latter could no longer regain its status as a "reliable partner" and had since transform into a "liar"²⁹⁴ and a "revisionist imperialist"²⁹⁵. On December 31, 2022, E. Macron declared to Ukrainians: *"We respect you and we admire you. Your fight to defend your nation is heroic and it inspires us. During the coming year, we will be at your side without falter. We will help you until victory and we will work together to build a just and lasting peace. Count on France and count on Europe"*.²⁹⁶

In 2023, a new step was reached in the harshness of his rhetoric towards Russia when the French leader expressed at the Globsec conference in Bratislava: *"The aggression against Ukraine is, at its core, the ultimate expression of fragility and a challenge to our European unity that has unfolded over the past 15 years. Fifteen years during which Russia has repeatedly sought to undermine and reshape the entire European security architecture on its own terms"*.²⁹⁷

²⁹³ Ariane Chemin and Philippe Ricard, "Guerre En Ukraine: Le Cavalier Seul Diplomatique d'Emmanuel Macron," *Le Monde*, December 12, 2022.

²⁹⁴ Pauline Théveniaud, "Emmanuel Macron Hausse Le Ton Contre Vladimir Poutine: Qu'il 'Arrête de Mentir,'" *Le Parisien*, April 24, 2025.

²⁹⁵ Le Monde, "Emmanuel Macron Qualifie Vladimir Poutine d'Impérialiste Révisionniste," *Le Monde*, March 7, 2025.

²⁹⁶ Emmanuel Macron, "Déclaration du Président de La République, Sur Les Réformes Engagées En 2022, La Solidarité Avec l'Ukraine, l'Ouverture Des Frontières de La Chine et Les Priorités de La Politique Gouvernementale Pour 2023, Notamment La Réforme Des Retraites, à Paris", December, 31, 2022.

²⁹⁷ Emmanuel Macron, "Sommet Globsec à Bratislava", June, 1, 2023.

These vehement criticisms against Russia, emphasising its violations of ethics and principles, and its responsibility for the ongoing situation aggressive policy since 2022, have not been well received in Russia, which responded for years with the same threatening tone. Just after the war outbreak, Moscow accused France of violating “diplomatic ethics” while, attempting his last negotiations talks to appease the situation, E. Macron had authorised the release of a TV reportage detailing his conversation with V. Putin without the Kremlin’s approval.²⁹⁸ Tensions escalated further in the years that followed, as France’s involvement in Ukraine took on greater shape as part of the Western coalition of support. More generally, within the Russian political elite, France is no longer taken seriously, perceived as ambiguous due to its involvement in the Minsk agreements and its prior willingness to listen to certain Russian viewpoints before the conflict. In addition, French policy has come under increasing criticism in Russian public opinion, as many media were targeting E. Macron, blaming him for a share of responsibility in the war. A major propaganda campaign was indeed launched against Paris, involving many political and media figures. For instance, in 2024, Dmitry Medvedev labeled the French President a “coward”, while Duma Vice-President, Pyotr Tolstoy, warned that Russia would “kill all French soldiers in Ukraine”. Through this war rhetoric, Moscow was also targeting its domestic audience to justify the war. This escalation in language contributes to reinforcing Russia’s narrative of the “decadence of the West”, with France portrayed as a key symbol of that decline.²⁹⁹

Fully aware of the escalating severity of Russian policy, E. Macron completely reversed his diplomatic approach at the end of the year, adapting France’s posture to the new balance of power. The strategy thus shifted from dialogue to a power-based confrontation with Moscow, aimed at asserting France’s influence by supporting Ukraine and abandoning any illusions about the personal relationship with Vladimir Putin. This rupture was also framed within a European context: increasingly viewed as hostile to Europe, Russia came to be seen as a significant threat to the European project. Given its prior policies, France’s credibility in Europe was also at stake. In fact, initially, this strategic shift generated some confusion among European partners, however France subsequently emerged as a mobilising force.³⁰⁰ One could argue therefore that this reversal presented an opportunity, as French diplomacy, by taking a

²⁹⁸ Philippe Ricard, “Russia Accuses France of Violating ‘Diplomatic Ethics’”, *Le Monde*, July 7, 2022.

²⁹⁹ Olivier Poujade Poujade, “Un monde d’avance: Russie: La France Est Devenue La Cible Privilégiée Des Médias Propagandistes Du Kremlin”, *France Info*, March 22, 2024.

³⁰⁰ Pierre Haski, “Géopolitique : Pourquoi Trump Estime Soudain Que Poutine Est ‘Devenu Complètement Fou’”, *France Inter*, May 27, 2025.

leading role in the collation in support of Ukraine, positioned itself as a driver of European reengagement, solidarity and strengths. In this regard, already in March 2022, E. Macron was emphasising this idea in a speech at Versailles, declaring: “*Everyone now understands that European sovereignty and strategic autonomy are imperative*”.³⁰¹

Donald Trump’s return at the White House confirmed further the new direction taken by the French President towards European autonomy and Ukraine’s wholehearted support, with very contrasting approaches - if not opposed - to the conflict’s settlement from those of the US administration. Besides, it is worth observing that, despite the reversal in French diplomacy posture, the fundamental objective of its foreign policy remained unchanged. In fact, before the war in Ukraine, dialogue with Russia aimed precisely to ease European tensions by establishing a common security framework between Europe and Eurasia, for a renewed and sovereign continent. The 2022 rupture has been grounded in the very same objective, albeit now obviously excluding Russia from the project. Therefore, the new foreign policy orientation continues to pursue the European ambition that previously motivated earlier attempts to rapprochement. Moreover, French diplomacy remained relatively unified, as a large part quickly embraced E. Macron’s new approach, believing it was the most coherent course of action given the evolution of the situation. Some had even been expecting it, convinced for a long time that France no longer had anything to obtain from Russia, and had probably overestimated its own capacity for dialogue with the Kremlin.³⁰² In this line of thought, previous overtures had, in fact, revealed the limits of France’s traditional foreign policy, i.e., a mediating power supposed to play a pivotal and balancing role to protect its interests. This idea confirms the internal divisions within French diplomacy and the interest in deconstructing the myth of a “privileged relationship” with Russia, by recalling the numerous occasions when France had often confronted Moscow when the latter was not satisfying its interests.

The Foreign Policy reversal had a direct impact and lead to strong political decisions made by the French government. From 2022, Paris has been heavily involved in Ukraine’s financial, military and humanitarian support. By 2024, France had provided Ukraine with a total of €15,7 billion in support, half of which - €7, 5 billion - was raised at the EU level, through the European Peace Facility (EPF). In total, €134 billion has been raised by the Member States

³⁰¹ Emmanuel Macron, “Déclaration du Président de La République, Sur l’Union Européenne Face Au Conflit En Ukraine et Ses Conséquences Pour La Construction Européenne, à Versailles”, March, 11, 2022.

³⁰² Dimitri Minic, *op.cit.*

with France representing the second contributor.³⁰³ French military deliveries included 42 self-propelled howitzer type CAESAR, 46,500 shells, 38 armoured vehicles, around one hundred SCALP-type missiles, high-precision defense systems and even Mirage 2000-5 fighter jets. In addition, in July 2024, France has decided to host between around 3,000 Ukrainian soldiers on its soil to form a regiment. Named “Anne de Kiev”, this brigade has been equipped and trained by the French armies, transferring military knowledge and techniques. In total, Paris claims to have trained 5,200 soldiers since 2022, including the units instructed by the 200 French military personnel sent to a former Soviet base in Poland.³⁰⁴ Russia did not welcome this heightened involvement, and in response, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov stated: “*Any French serviceman in Ukraine, whether as an instructor or a mercenary, is a legitimate target for Russia*”.³⁰⁵

Moreover, from the beginning of the conflict, France has devoted over €434 million to humanitarian aid in Ukraine, including health, education and refugee assistance projects, while the cost of the welcoming Ukrainian refugees in France represented more than €3 billion.³⁰⁶ France has also set up partnerships with Ukrainian industry to maintain and produce spare parts. In 2024, the Ministry of the Armed Forces explained unambiguously: “*Above all, France wishes to have the greatest possible influence on the course of events and the final outcome of the war, over and above competitions over figures. In this respect, French aid includes specific features that are its trademark and make it particularly appreciated by the Ukrainian side*”.³⁰⁷

Finally, this evolution toward a highly critical view of Russia and its foreign policy is further reinforced by the French public’s general opinion on Moscow and the war. Indeed, in 2024, 82% of French people had a negative opinion of Russia, while 61% felt that Vladimir Putin was a real threat to France’s security, albeit half of them were unconvinced of sending military equipment to Ukraine.³⁰⁸ Beyond the war, two issues fueled negative opinions of the Kremlin’s foreign policy in France. On the one hand, a clear perception has emerged concerning

³⁰³ France Info, “Le vrai ou faux : Guerre En Ukraine : La France A-t-Elle Donné 28 Milliards d’Euros d’Aides à L’Ukraine ?”, *France Info*, September 4, 2024.

³⁰⁴ Elise Vincent, “En Pologne, Les Français Dévoilent Pour La Première Fois l’Entraînement Qu’ils Dispensent Aux Soldats Ukrainiens,” *Le Monde*, July 11, 2023.

³⁰⁵ Sergey Lavrov, “Tout Militaire Français En Ukraine Représente Une Cible Légitime Pour La Russie”, *APA* 2024.

³⁰⁶ Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères, “Aide Humanitaire de La France à L’Ukraine,” *France Diplomatie*, 2022.

³⁰⁷ GIFAS, “Depuis 2022, La France a Financé l’Ukraine à Hauteur de 5,1 Md€”, *GIFAS*, 2022.

³⁰⁸ IFOP, “Le Regard Des Français Sur La Crise En Ukraine,” *IFOP*, 2023.

Moscow's increasingly radical behavior on the international stage. This reflection has been accentuated by Russian growing number of hostile acts of interference against Europe and France, most often through cyber and technological means. These attacks, most often carried out against public institutions such as hospitals and government administrations, have significant impacts on both French citizens and public finances. Although it is difficult to obtain reliable figures for such operation, most sources estimate that several hundred cyber-attacks ordered by Russia occur annually, with a marked increase following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.³⁰⁹ In its 2024 annual report, the French National Agency for Information Systems Security (ANSSI) described Russia as "*the main threat both to the most critical information systems and to the national ecosystem in a systemic way*".³¹⁰

On the other hand, Russia's confrontational posture in Africa has also led to growing frustration with Moscow. From Libya to Chad, passing through Mali, the Central African Republic and Burkina Faso, V. Putin has been using all the possible levers - mainly corruption, Russian troll factories, spies, mercenary and propagandists - also fueling the resentment toward France as a former colonial power. As a result, Paris has increasingly become a target of Russia's influence operations in Africa, with Moscow challenging France's traditional links in Africa - or even driving them out. For several years now, humiliating Paris in these countries has served as an indirect Russian strategy to undermine the West, and particularly France. As political scientist Roland Marchal observes: "*The arrival of the Russians has been accompanied by a rather violently orchestrated anti-French campaign, and not only was Paris' policy denounced, but there were also calls to attack the French on the ground*".³¹¹

Furthermore, as outlined the first chapter of the thesis, Moscow's efforts to politically destabilise European countries also impacted France's domestic politics, greatly influencing the 2017 presidential elections and shaping various party programs in order to re-habilitate Russia's image. As the historian Andrei Tsygankov recalls it: "*The Kremlin launched a PR offensive to win support from conservatively minded government and various political constituencies in Europe, condemning Western interventionist policies, "fascism" in Ukraine, sanctions against the Russian economy, secularism, and the EU lack of independence in face of the U.S. Among*

³⁰⁹ Sam Schechner, "France Blames Russia for Years of Cyberattacks," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 29, 2025.

³¹⁰ Agence Nationale de la Sécurité des Systèmes d'Information, "Panorama de La Cybermenace 2024", 2025.

³¹¹ Pierre Desorgues, "La Centrafrique, Nouveau Symbole Du Retour de La Russie En Afrique," *TV5 Monde*, December 20, 2020.

*those supportive of Russia's conservative approach were the governments of Greece, Serbia, and Hungary, as well as political movements and politicians in Austria, Britain, France, Germany, Greece, and other countries".*³¹²

Hence, Russia's use of pressure tactics was also encouraged by the enduring myth of the "privileged relationship" with France. This narrative clearly influenced certain political positions advocating a "renewal of the Franco-Russian friendship and partnership" and echoing the Kremlin's agenda. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that from 2022 onward, following France's foreign policy reversal, these influences almost entirely disappeared. All political parties - even the most extremist ones - collectively condemned the invasion of Ukraine and the Russian violations of international law. Thus, this evolution further demonstrates how the myth of the "special bond" had, until recently, shaped the lines and programs of different political forces. As in French diplomacy, this narrative lost its relevance in domestic politics, highlighting the significance of its dismantling. With this leverage gone, France's strategic reorientation of its foreign policy intensified, culminating in a break with several historic positions, two of the most notable being the granting of EU candidate status to Ukraine in June 2022 and the support for its NATO Membership in June 2023.

4.3.Shift in Positions on the EU and NATO

Before completely changing tone, E. Macron had shown very little enthusiasm for European enlargement in the past. In fact, before the invasion of Ukraine, he frequently expressed his reluctance, blocking the opening of accession talks with new countries including, of course, Kiev. At the 2019 EU summit in Brussels, he clearly opposed talks concerning Albania and North Macedonia. On that occasion, he declared: *"The aim of Europe must not be to enlarge at all costs. It doesn't work well with 27 Member States already, it won't work any better with 28, 30 or 32. Before welcoming new Member States into the Union, let's reform it. Let's do things in the right order"*.³¹³

³¹² Andrei P. Tsygankov, "The West, the Non-West, and Russia's 'Civilizational' Turn," in *Russia's Foreign Policy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 233–61.

³¹³ Lucie Oriol, "Sur l'Entrée de l'Albanie et La Macédoine Dans l'UE, Macron Déçoit Ses Alliés," *Le HuffPost*, October 18, 2019.

While France's reversed his foreign policy after the war in Ukraine, the French President adjusted his stance toward this new direction. From 2022 onwards, France began to increasingly support the idea of faster European integration of Ukraine. During 2022 French Presidency of the EU, Paris drove the granting of candidate status to Ukraine, marking a turning point in its enlargement policy. In December 2023, the EU officially opened accession negotiations with Ukraine, France's pushing again for these enlargement decisions, which now had become a key element of its foreign policy strategy for Europe.

The confrontation with Russia even prompted France and its EU partners to launch accession talks with Moldova and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and to grant candidate status to Georgia. At Bratislava security summit, E. Macron declared in 2023 in this regard: "*The question for us is not whether we should enlarge, we answered that a year ago; nor similarly when we should do it, which for me is as soon as possible, but how we should do it*".³¹⁴

The French foreign policy turnaround has therefore been illustrated first and foremost by a shift in its position on the enlargement of Eastern European states - particularly Ukraine - which France had historically opposed. While the strategy regarding EU integration gained progressively momentum in 2023, France's evolving stance on NATO further demonstrates this shift. During the same year, E. Macron's numerous speeches discredited Russian policy by heavily criticising Moscow's regime with increasing severity. A new threshold was crossed in June, when France officially expressed support for Ukraine's integration into the Atlantic organisation. This decision, taken following a Defense Council meeting, aimed to exert pressure on the conflict, encouraging Moscow and Kiev to return to the negotiating table. France's approach has thus undergone a complete reversal, marking a full alignment with the positions long defended by Central European countries. This shift represented a turning point, considering that France had consistently opposed any prospect of Ukraine joining NATO, as its opposition alongside Germany at the 2008 Bucharest Summit - discussed in the first chapter of this thesis - was a significant moment. Even more strikingly, as recently as November 2019, E. Macron had questioned the alliance's strategic objectives and the divisions among its members, declaring in an interview with *The Economist*: "*What we are experiencing is the brain death of NATO*".³¹⁵

³¹⁴ Emmanuel Macron, "Sommet Globsec à Bratislava", June, 1, 2023.

³¹⁵ Emmanuel Macron, "Emmanuel Macron Warns Europe: NATO Is Becoming Brain-Dead," *The Economist*, November 7, 2019.

Raising controversy in many European capitals after this declaration, he later even congratulated himself for having “*awakened the Alliance, which had fallen prey to a blatant and unacceptable state of disconnection*”.³¹⁶

These statements, only four years apart from the decision to give full support to Ukraine’s accession to NATO, highlight a staggering contrast and further illustrate the profound shift in France’s foreign policy. The strategy of appeasing Russia has no longer been on Paris’ agenda, as it now appears convinced that pursuing the opposite course of action could prove to be a more effective plan. This process is perfectly encapsulated by the researcher David Cadier, who wrote: “*France’s policy shift on Ukraine in NATO is part of a broader structural shift in its foreign policy that will affect the equilibrium on European debates over security and enlargement. After being one of the staunchest opponents to “geopoliticizing” the way the European Union and NATO approached their eastern and southeastern peripheries, France is now openly embracing and promoting it*”.³¹⁷

Paris’ approach was rather to pave the way for Ukraine’s membership and to offer “security guarantees” aimed at sustained the military aid provided by the West, especially as, at this time, Kiev was facing military difficulties. The consolidation of a European defense also reflects the French President’s determination to turn this moment of crisis into an opportunity for strengthening. In order to reinforce his position, E. Macron has been able to dispel the lingering doubts about his former dialogue-based approach to Russia, by embracing a renewed political legitimacy for NATO. In addition, the French President was also capitalising concerns about European stability, particularly around uncertainties surrounding the future of the transatlantic bonds, exacerbated by the prospect - and eventual return - of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency in 2025.³¹⁸ These developments further reinforced the rationale for building a European defense framework, or at the very least, a “European pillar” within NATO, in which France would play prominent role. Moreover, Ukraine’s accession to NATO would enable Europe to rely on an ally that would have experienced wartime, and whose emerging military structures would be then supervised by Alliance members, thereby supporting for the country’s

³¹⁶ Le Monde, “OTAN: Emmanuel Macron Se Félicite d’Avoir ‘Réveillé’ l’Alliance, En Proie à ‘Une Déconnexion Criante et Inacceptable,’” *Le Monde*, November 28, 2019.

³¹⁷ David Cadier and Martin Quencez, “France’s Policy Shift on Ukraine’s NATO Membership Rocks”, *War on the Rocks*, August 10, 2023.

³¹⁸ Dimitri Minic, *op.cit.*

post-war reconstruction. Ultimately, this strategy could prove cost-effective, by preventing future invasions and the associated expenses, thanks to the collective protection guaranteed by NATO. From 2022, the West is paying the price of this war on two fronts: by financing the Ukrainian army and by bearing major industrial and energy-related consequences felt in each country.³¹⁹ This reversal further confirms that the myth of a “privileged relation” was being set aside. However, the reactions of some diplomats suggest that the historical narrative which had long been driving French foreign policy toward Russia, still lingered within parts of French diplomacy. Indeed, as underlines it David Cadier: “*E. Macron’s new stance caught NATO partners, as well as French analysts and maybe even some French diplomats and military officials, off guard. Their surprise is understandable, as this shift breaks with the country’s years-long position as well as some of Macron’s own diplomatic initiatives from recent years*”.³²⁰

Finally, the climax of the reorientation of French policy toward NATO reached a turning point in February 2024, when, in a bid to boost European strategy, E. Macron did not hesitate to talk openly about the possibility of deploying NATO ground troops to fight for “defeating Russia”. In a national television interview, he acknowledged that he was not ruling out such an option. This proposal further escalated tensions with Vladimir Putin, who responded by reiterating nuclear threats as a “defensive tool”. The French President’s words could easily have come from Baltic or Polish leaders, who have long been advocating this idea. Indeed, the prime ministers of Finland and Czech Republic, as well as the heads of the European institutions, immediately expressed their support for E. Macron’s statement. Unsurprisingly, this shift in tone has been therefore broadly appreciated in Eastern Europe, albeit part of the public opinion remained concerned of the risk of unnecessary escalation.³²¹

In this respect, and to draw a parallel with first chapter’s press review (cf. 3.2), it is interesting to note that while the European press was strongly critical of the French President’s perceived passivity toward Russia at the start of the war, journalists from similar countries condemned this turnaround, describing it as an “opportunist” and “provocative” diplomatic move. For instance, the Polish opinion media *Wirtualna Polska*, referring to “a risky game”, emphasises that E. Macron’s comments on sending troops in Ukraine could undermine ongoing support

³¹⁹ David Cadier and Martin Quencez, *op.cit.*

³²⁰ *Ibidem.*

³²¹ Romain Le Quiniou, “Discours de Bratislava: Des Paroles Aux Actes”, *Institut Montaigne*, 2025.

efforts. The author suggests that such statements could rekindle fears of a direct conflict between the West and Russia, which European countries are seeking to avoid. The article also criticised Paris' stance as premature and likely to isolate France within the EU.³²² Similarly, in its March 2024 edition, the Hungarian weekly *Mandiner* illustrated the Macron-Putin confrontation, by comparing it to a duel between a Russian Tsar and Napoleon, headlining the article: "War Psychosis" (cf. Figure 6 in the appendix). The magazine concludes that, with this escalation, the French President seriously disrupted European diplomatic relations and heightened the risk of nuclear war.³²³

Hence, from one period to another, French foreign policy strategy has been subject to constant criticism. From 2022, however, one feature has emerged in the context of European dynamics: France's new stance was no longer shared by Germany, as it had traditionally been the case, even at the beginning of the crisis between E. Macron and O. Scholz (cf. Figure 2 in the appendix). In fact, over time, France's radical shift in direction was not fully supported by German foreign policy, which witnessed a much more limited transformation, driven by different interests and diplomatic strategies. Consequently, the historical Paris-Berlin alignment on how engage with Russia was significantly re-evaluated.

4.4. The Franco-German Axis Reconsidered

As it has been shown in the first chapter, Paris and Berlin have traditionally shared a common approach in the foreign policy to pursue with Russia. This was concretely demonstrated before the crisis, with their joint involvement in the Minsk agreements via the Normandy Format, as well as in the EU sanctions campaign imposed in response to Russia's interventions in Ukraine - first in 2014 and more decisively in 2022 - where both countries played leading roles. Researcher David Cadier emphasises on the complementary role of Paris and Berlin during this phase: "*While Germany played the leading role, France did commit diplomatic resources to - and exposed itself politically in the course of - an intricate and lengthy conflict resolution process*".³²⁴

³²² Jakub Majmurek, "Risky Game. Macron Stepped out of Line with Words about Sending Troops to Ukraine," *Wiadomosci*, 2024.

³²³ Zoltán Pataki, "Macron Is Bidding on Russia - and Putin's Patience Is Running out Dangerously," *Mandiner*, March 24, 2024.

³²⁴ David Cadier, "Continuity and Change in France's Policies towards Russia: A Milieu Goals Explanation," *International Affairs* 94, no. 6 (November 1, 2018): 1349-69.

In this regard, it is worth noting that Berlin was often seen more active and decisive, both by Russia in its concrete efforts to implement the Minsk agreements, and by European countries in coordinating the response to the war in Ukraine. In 2022, French and German foreign policies were therefore still on the same wavelength. E. Macron and O. Scholz both continued to engage dialogue with V. Putin after the invasion with the aim of finding a solution through negotiations and were similarly criticised by the countries of Eastern and Central Europe for doing so. The two leaders ceased conversation with the Russian President around the same time. Likewise, their full support for Kiev have been developed gradually and in parallel, with Berlin participating massively in the delivery of military equipment as well as financial and humanitarian aid, both nationally and through European mechanism. In fact, according to the Kiel Institute calculations, between 2022 and 2024, German support amounted a total of €8 billion, including more than €17 billion in bilateral government assistance - compared to France's 5 €billion - making Germany the second largest contributor after the United States and its over \$100 billion.³²⁵ These figures further confirmed that the Franco-German approach at the start of the war did not betray their traditional line of common foreign policy, gradually and cautiously distancing themselves from Moscow. Yet, when France later accelerated its shift - taking the previous unprecedented steps that contributed to a total reversal in its approach to Russia - this historic entente was ultimately undermined.

Indeed, Germany still faithful to its traditional line, didn't aligned with French new diplomatic moves. Although most of the EU's other partners appeared satisfied with this turnaround, Berlin remained the most hesitant, having long opposed permanent NATO military deployments on Russia's borders, as well as Ukraine's membership in both NATO and the EU. Germany feared that making such bold diplomatic moves in times of war could prove counterproductive to efficiently achieving a sustainable peace. For this reason, it has been suggesting a more cautious approach, positioning itself as the main "obstacle" to Ukraine's NATO accession. David Cadier highlighted the impact this issue has placed on Franco-German relations, which were already marked by various disagreements: "*The French shift on Ukraine has already led to some irritation in Berlin, where it is in fact perceived as tactical and opportunistic*".³²⁶

³²⁵ Christoph Trebesch, Giuseppe Irto, and Taro Nishikawa, "Ukraine Support Tracker - a Database of Military, Financial and Humanitarian Aid to Ukraine," *Kiel Institute*, April 14, 2025.

³²⁶ David Cadier and Martin Quencez, *op.cit.*

These disagreements took very concrete forms in foreign policy decisions. For example, although O. Scholz's government signalled a paradigm shift, it wavered for a long time and consistently refused to take first initiatives in supporting Ukraine. Moreover, Germany declined to send overly sophisticated military equipment to Kiev, such as long-range missiles - like the Taurus KEPD - and insisted that assistance should remain strictly defensive in nature, when many countries were calling for more massive and direct support. France, by contrast, has been adopting this stance alone, believing that the future of the European project and the creation of a strong and sovereign Europe depended on credible, large-scale, and sustained support for Ukraine. Moreover, while both leaders had suspended direct dialogue with Vladimir Putin for two years, the German chancellor even breached this implicit position, by calling his Russian counterpart in November 2024. This reconnection, seen as a return to dialogue-based diplomacy, shocked many European leaders - first and foremost V. Zelenskyy - who harshly criticised the initiative. France also expressed concern, particularly given that the call came at a strategically critical phase for Ukraine.³²⁷ Tatiana Kastouéva-Jean, Director of the Russia-Eurasia Center at the French Institute of International Relations, commented on the issue: *"This call can only reinforce Putin's belief that Germany is eager to return to 'business as usual' at the first opportunity - especially when it comes to purchasing cheap gas"*.³²⁸

Furthermore, O. Scholz was even more sceptical, when E. Macron mentioned he did not rule out the possibility of sending NATO troops to fight in Ukraine, as part of an unlimited assistance strategy. Berlin remained worried about Paris' strategic ambiguity to dissuade Russia through both vehement rhetoric and massive military support to Ukraine. As a result, Germany neither endorsed, nor validated this shift in position, finding it difficult to support such an escalation. In the end, the German Chancellor's stance on the Ukrainian issue has consistently been to promote diplomacy and avoid rising tensions, while continuing to provide Ukraine with financial and military assistance. These divergences further underscore the unprecedented nature of Paris' shift in foreign policy regarding Russia and the war in Ukraine.³²⁹

³²⁷ Deutsche Welle, "Germany's Scholz Calls Putin for First Time in 2 Years", *Deutsche Welle*, November 15, 2024.

³²⁸ Tatiana Kastouéva Jean, "Guerre En Ukraine : Pourquoi l'Appel Téléphonique d'Olaf Scholz à Vladimir Poutine Irrite Kiev," Zoé Aucaigne, *France Info*, November 16, 2024.

³²⁹ Pierre Haski, "Géopolitique: Pourquoi Emmanuel Macron S'est Radicalisé Face à La Russie", *France Inter*, March, 15, 2024.

The Franco-German separation in foreign policy stems from several factors, two of which are particularly relevant to how these historically close European neighbours approach their relationship with Russia. On the one hand, Germany has been less inclined to support such a drastic shift, as its commercial and energy interests remain far more dependent on its ties with Moscow. By contrast, France is one of the EU member states least reliant on Russian energy imports, and - as the previous sections outlined - its trade relations with Russia have always been far less significant than those of Germany or Italy. On the other hand, Berlin has a very different experience and memory of Russia compared to Paris. Germany's approach tends to prioritise concrete realities over the influence of historical narratives, which has long shaped France's perception of Russia. By emphasising economic and energy cooperations, Germany has consistently advocated for a new European security architecture that includes Moscow, and its cautious reaction after the war is rooted in the same considerations. Besides, O. Scholz's prudence was also shaped by the domestic political context of the up-coming 2025 elections, fuelling intense divisions within German society over the question of Ukraine.³³⁰

Hence, this breakdown in the traditional alignment with Germany confirms that the Franco-German "mediator couple" may now belong to the past. This rift carries a dual risk: the failure to manage both growing tensions and increasingly divergent positions. However, the recent change in German leadership with the arrival of Friedrich Merz could eventually signal a shift in direction. Indeed, the new German Chancellor may steer its country toward aligning more closely with France's position in favor of a full-strategic reversal. A first sign of this potential change already appeared during his first month in power, when, in May 2025, he announced the lifting of restrictions on the delivery of Western missiles to Ukraine, including those capable of striking targets on Russian territory.³³¹

³³⁰ David Cadier, "Continuity and Change in France's Policies towards Russia: A Milieu Goals Explanation," *International Affairs* 94, no. 6 (November 1, 2018): 1349–69.

³³¹ Pierre Haski, "Géopolitique: Pourquoi Trump Estime Soudain Que Poutine Est 'Devenu Complètement Fou'," *France Inter*, May 27, 2025.

CHAPTER 3/ THE ROLE OF RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MYTH'S DECONSTRUCTION

1. Internal Political Divisions

*“Our country was turned into a hostage of messianic ideas, on behalf of which it sacrificed its national interests. Western democracies are as natural friends and eventual allies of the democratic Russia as they are foes of the totalitarian USSR.”*³³²

Andrei Kozyrev, Westernist Doctrine, 1992

*“Of course, relations with the West have always been of great importance but our country should not forget its own interests and follow the historic shift towards a multipolar world. We must preserve our values and traditions, acquired throughout Russian history, including the imperial and Soviet periods.”*³³³

Yevgeny Primakov, Statist Doctrine, 1998

1.1. Introductory Preamble

Before deeply analysing the role of Russian Foreign policy in the deterioration of relations with France, more generally deconstructing the myth of a “privileged relationship”, the following part will briefly shed light on the formation of the Russian national interest. Oscillating between periods of change and continuity, it has always followed specific internal priorities and contexts, dividing Russia’s political class and guiding its foreign policy objectives and decisions. In this respect, Moscow’s relationship with the outside world has been shaped by these different domestic views and tendencies, influencing therefore Russia’s behaviour towards Western nations and the development of their mutual links. This had admitted various – and sometimes opposed - strategies and approaches within Russian diplomacy, leading to periods of alternation regarding cooperation – or distance – with Europe. It is important to give space to their explanations in this thesis work in order to grasp the complexity of Russia’s

³³² Andrei Kozyrev, “Rossiya v Novom Mire, Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn,” in *The Lagging Partnership* (Foreign Affairs: no. 3, 1994), 59.

³³³ Gilles Gressani, “La Doctrine Primakov,” *Le Grand Continent*, 2017.

foreign policy and understand that plural ways of thinking have been driving Moscow's diplomatic choices, directly impacting the relation it cultivates with the West. This analytical part is mainly based on the major work of the Russian-American historian, Andrei Tsygankov, Professor at San Francisco State University.

As analysed for France in the previous section, through the lens of Realpolitik, Russian foreign policy has also been shaped on responses to specific international contexts in order to defend its national interests. For centuries, through monarchic and tsarist eras of Russian history, this interest has enjoyed exceptional continuity. Indeed, being the largest country in the world since the mid-16th century, Russia's most important challenge has always been to ensure and preserve the internal integrity of its territory, asserting State's power over this immense geographical area. In addition, it also had parallelly to deal with constant external threats due to its multiple borders and the unstable environment coming from its neighbours. Over the centuries, these difficulties have led to various interpretations of the appropriate strategy to address the situation, resulting in shifts in foreign policy choices and implementations. A. Tsygankov classified three main foreign policy ideologies that have forged Russian national interest and diplomatic mindset: the Statist, the Civilisationist and the Westernist. Lately, Vladimir Putin added a fourth hybrid approach, which he considered as a pragmatic synthesis of the three foreign policy's schools of thought. Each of these thinking have had followers within the Russian establishment and its main leaders have thus been supporting a certain conception of the nation's interests. Additionally, these ways of thinking have influenced the intellectual formation of future generations, which would have made up the next political classes.³³⁴

1.2. Civilisationists, Westernists, and Statists

Firstly, Civilisationists are probably the oldest and the most antagonistic to the West and Europe. Affirming strong and powerful values claimed on an old-centuries heritage, this school of thought has been defending Russian civilisation in the attempt to spread its influence in other geographical parts such as Central and South Asia. Based on an aggressive foreign policy, the approach was intended to use violence unscrupulously as a feasible means to satisfy

³³⁴ Andrei P. Tsygankov, "Understanding Change and Continuity in Russia's Foreign Policy," in *Russia's Foreign Policy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 1–33.

Russian interests. To counter Western actions in Europe, Civilisationists' foreign policy has recommended Russia's borders to expand east and west, albeit it admitted to respect the "Pan Slavism" ideology, i.e., the unity of the Slaves into one single people. A. Tsygankov dates the roots of Civilisationism back to Ivan the Terrible - Tsar Ivan IV - who used to claim, to challenge Western moral and ideological beliefs, that Moscow was "the third Rome". Hence, this doctrine has clearly been the most hostile to any rapprochement with Europe and the West, advocating cultural differentiation, particularly through religious elements which rely either on Orthodox Christianity or the religions' conglomerate that have always existed in Russia. Central in the Empire, Civilisationists crossed Russia's eras, sharply influencing the foreign policies of its rulers. A recent example has been the early-original Leninist-Trotskyist ideology, in which coexistence with the West was declared impossible. Similarly, during his long years as the head of Soviet diplomacy, Minister Andrei Gromyko based its foreign policy on the idea that "external expansion" was "the best political means of ensuring Russia's security", serving at the same time to counter the Atlanticist movement which Russians deemed as being the exact opposite. Civilisationists have therefore been of recent importance in the formation of Russian foreign policy, which is still witnessing some influence from this old-age approach. Like the Soviets, its supporters sought to use expansion as a means to respond to the West's "global imperialism", while paradoxically seeing Europe as an inferior and degrading civilisation. It is worth drawing a parallel with the last five years, in which it could be considered that expansionism has been seen by Russia's leaders as a legitimate strategy, stemming first and foremost from the international context. However, this school of thought has always been internally contrasted by its "opposite" thanks to Westernists, which, less violent and more accommodating with Europe, deserves attention as well.³³⁵

In fact, Westernists, as their name suggests, focused their view on a strategic rapprochement with the West, which is perceived to be the civilisation to follow, as its progressists aspects - human conditions, economical standards, way of life, political pluralism, etc. - provide inspiration to implement them in Russia. As a prime historical example, Peter the Great could be perceived as the first Westernist since his campaign all over Europe - which France ignored for a very long time - symbolises the admiration and the will of closer ties with the West, particularly in order to borrow European techniques, art, technology, etc. Then, over centuries, this liberal thinking expressed itself through many leaders such as tsar Alexander II

³³⁵ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *op. cit.*, 1-33.

who was willing to implement European constitutionalist principles, or Ministry of foreign affairs Pavel Milyukov, defending during the First World War, that the coalition against Germany was following Russia's identity orientation and values, despite the devastation it had brought in the country. During the Soviet period, Mikhail Gorbachev was probably the Soviet leader who most strongly embodied Westernist thinking. Its internal policy reforms – *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* – clearly took a Western accent, inspired by European social democratic models and breaking with the severe Stalinist version of communism. Indeed, Western European countries – France in the first place – had all warmly welcomed these new policies. Furthermore, Gorbachev's foreign policy goals were similarly based on a strong cooperation with Europe to obtain mutual security with the West. Introducing his famous idea of “common European home”, the last USSR leader dreamed of completing Russian integration within Europe. During his period of governance, the Westernists' ideas greatly rose among elites and the general public opinion.

Thereafter, this willingness to apply this vision in foreign policy continued to influence the post-Soviet era with new leaders promoting the alignment of their country with Europe, almost seen as “natural” in the context of the USSR's collapse. Political rhetoric around human rights, free market, and democracy was in the process of making its way through, with figures such as Andrei Kozyrev or Boris Yeltsin. Their vision of “strategic partnership and integration” with the West suggested that Russia would catch up with its economic backwardness and emancipate its age-old institutions thanks to this rapprochement. This foreign policy thinking gave therefore less importance to the former Soviet republics, emphasising on European cooperation with the global aim of re-civilising Russia, while addressing at the same time eternal threats still prevalent in the country. In the end, the last recent period witnessing the Westernist approach implemented in Russian foreign policy was during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency. In fact, at the beginning of the 2010s, he pushed for liberal reforms to fight Russia's corruption and proposed a new “Pan European security framework” while trying to integrate Western standards both economically and politically. Based on modernisation, he multiplied international alliances in the will of seeking integration in various treaties and organisations. More generally, Westernists kept an important influence among Russian diplomacy during the 21st century, particularly regarding the updating of Russia's standards in terms of free market competition, pluralism, or transparency.³³⁶

³³⁶ Andrei P. Tsygankov, “The Post-Cold War Euphoria and Russia's Liberal Westernism,” in *Russia's Foreign Policy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 59–97.

Finally, the supporters of the third school of thought, Statists, have been promoting a more balanced foreign policy through the ages, aiming at the capacity of the State to govern effectively and maintain social and political stability. Emphasis has thus been given on the continuity of the power of the State and its sovereignty, rather than on principles such as democracy or freedom. According to Statists, these values are not inherently negative, but foreign policy must not hesitate to ignore them if State authority is threatened. The latter is considered at the core of the Statist ideology, and it shall be undermined under any circumstance, in order to guarantee stability and unity of such a vast territory. This way of asserting power has given confidence to the rulers to guide their country, often with an iron fist. External threats have therefore been seen as the primary feeling of insecurity, justifying with almost no interruption, war expeditions and military financing. A. Tsygankov said in this regard: *“Ever since the two-centuries-long conquest by the Mongols, Russians have developed a psychological complex of insecurity and a readiness to sacrifice everything for independence and sovereignty. Multiple wars in Europe and Asia further reinforced this mentality and provided Statism’s supporters with extra justifications for their reasoning”*.³³⁷

Statists are not anti-Western per se, in the sense that rapprochement with the West can be activated, but it must respect Russian security’s prime interests beyond any other objective. This logic frequently resulted in a desire for little cooperation, especially oriented on economic issues and military capacities, admitting the so-called “relative accommodation” or “correlation of forces” with the West. At the same time, it sought to challenge the Western narrative by demonstrating that the model of state-society relations promoted in Europe was not as universal and valid as it was claimed. Admitting paradoxically a common security model with Europe, these balanced strategies were however always aiming to support Russia’s security interest, preserve its independence from the outside world and strengthen the power of its State. Statists have definitely been the most influential and powerful doctrine in the history of Russian foreign policy, fueling visions and strategies of many leaders, whether tsars, monarchs or communists. In fact, both Joseph Stalin and Alexander Gorchakov - Alexander II’s foreign Minister - were defenders of Statists’ foreign policies. While sometimes extremely opposed, even forming separate branches of Statists - socialists versus liberals - and ruling in completely different geopolitical contexts, several great names of Russia’s history have adopted this philosophy. B. Yeltsin’s second foreign Minister, Yevgeny Primakov, made this vision particularly popular,

³³⁷ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *op. cit.*, 1-33.

increasingly influencing Russian political circles. Reversing A. Kozyrev's Westernist foreign policy, he implemented these guidelines in his external strategy with the objective of maintaining Russia's status and balancing from Western dominance. Internal and international issues such as the Chechnya crisis or NATO enlargement further reinforced the Statist's influence. Hence, the affirmation of the State's powerfulness at all costs has therefore always been driving Russia's foreign policy, with the will of preserving its greatness and status, still recently having great influence on political choices. Indeed, Vladimir Putin has been often referring to this complex tradition of political strategy. While liberalising the Russian economy, he rigidified its policy, in particular by enhancing control over legislature, political opposition, or media.³³⁸

Nevertheless, even if they capture the intricate reality of the Russian ruling class dilemma while facing its external actions' priorities, these three traditional approaches remain insufficient to fully grasp the complexity of Russia's international choices and behaviour. While security and power have been constants in the historical national interest, methods and strategies for achieving them have drastically changed over time. In this regard, A. Tsygankov underlined that, no matter which school of thought prevailed in Russia's internal debate, Europe and the West have always been of major concerns for the Kremlin's leaders: *"For both Westernizers and Statists, the West is a key point of reference, although each school understands its nature differently. Even Civilisationists, who rarely held a prominent position in domestic discourse, aspired to be respected by the West"*.³³⁹

1.3. Vladimir Putin's Pragmatic Synthesis

Many times, more than any other international context, domestic changes were at the origins of a new approach shaping. Internal divisions have therefore been crucial in terms of making the change in foreign policy liberal and progressive or, on the contrary, regressive by returning to more traditional forms. The process of building this policy has always been highly political, depending on variations and interpretations of national interest and identity, and where the openness to Europe - either for modernisation or defending State authority - has frequently represented a controversial debate. A. Tsygankov notes however that the arrival of Vladimir

³³⁸ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *op. cit.*, 1-33.

³³⁹ *Ibidem*.

Putin witnessed a new change in foreign policy and national interests, resulting in a synthesis of the two previous thoughts, which can be almost considered as a sort of middle path between Westernists' and Statists' views. In fact, V. Putin engaged Russia in a "pragmatic cooperation with the West" while stressing the importance of restoring the country's power and weight on the international stage. This "strategic innovation" allowed the Russian President to gain power and strength both domestically and internationally, receiving as well the support of the Russian public opinion.

A. Tsygankov accurately comments on V. Putin's new dimension: *"His vision of the national interests, which included the preservation of Russia's security and identity, socioeconomic development, and the strengthening of political institutions, resonated with the domestic public better than the security-underplayed Westernism of Kozyrev or the security-overplayed Eurasianism of Primakov.(...) Creatively borrowing from both, Pragmatic Cooperation helped to adjust to the West while preserving Russian own cultural legacy and long-standing relations with non-Western nations in Asia and the Muslim world."*³⁴⁰

The historian Thomas Gomart added in this respect: *"Putin's first rupture with traditional Russian foreign policy was to perceive the state as a tool to enhance the country's resources, reversing Soviet practice and breaking with imperial logic. He and his successors have to confront the tensions between aggressively promoting Russia's interests and being seen as a reliable partner."*³⁴¹

His analysis further confirmed A. Tsygankov's work, calling all these successive approaches "a mixture of isolationism and interventionism", illustrating Russian elites' indecision between the strong tradition of individualism in foreign policy and the ongoing difficulty of moving beyond the interventionist legacy of the post-Soviet era. The division over the relationship with the West has been further accentuated by drawing opposition among the leaders, who found themselves constrained to promote either their personal ambitions to be part of the "global elite", or the collective will of maintaining the traditional stance of defending State authority against external and internal threats.³⁴²

³⁴⁰ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *op. cit.*, 1-33.

³⁴¹ Thomas Gomart, "France's Russia Policy: Balancing Interests and Values," *The Washington Quarterly*, 2007.

³⁴² *Ibidem*.

1.4. Concluding Remarks

To conclude, the main point of A. Tsygankov's work is to comprehend that Russia did not experience over time a single and linear foreign policy, as the latter has always been shaped by an interlacing of thoughts, strategies and ways to interpret them. These approaches, sometimes similar but often far apart, have been forging the main lines of Russia's foreign policy, and explaining why Russian diplomacy and national interest have witnessed either continuity in certain areas and sharp changes in others. In addition, it is worth noting that the effectiveness of Moscow's foreign policy has never been determined by the prevailing approach in Russian debates. Indeed, none of the strategies that have derived from these thoughts enabled the country to reach perfection regarding its external actions, albeit it has been improving consistently with V. Putin's years in power with the "pragmatic cooperation" he developed, even granting him massive support among the Russian people.³⁴³

While it has been oscillating in its approach towards Europe and the West, Moscow has been exploiting its internal divisions to one single goal: the pursuit of its own strategic interests. Whether driven by the domestic scene or the international context, this national interest has been constantly changing foreign policy orientations and revealing, in recent years, a gradual hardening of Russian rulers' attitude. This evolution contributed to hindering dialogue development both at multilateral and bilateral levels, moderating the classical discourse of the "privileged relation" between France and Russia, and disclosing the starker reality of national interest obsession through Realpolitik rationale.

³⁴³ Andrei P. Tsygankov, "The World after September 11 and Pragmatic Cooperation," in *Russia's Foreign Policy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 135–77.

2. National Interest Dynamics and Progressive Distancing

*“Is it the role of a serious policy and a serious nation to pursue a dependent foreign policy while claiming to be a great power?”*³⁴⁴

Vladimir Putin, on France, 2016

*“Long years of sabotage of the Minsk agreements preceded the current situation and were actively used by Western countries to feed the Ukrainian regime and prepare a war against Russia, as the signatories of the Normandy Format have now openly admitted.”*³⁴⁵

Sergey Lavrov, after F. Hollande and A. Merkel’s revelations on the Minsk Agreement, 2023

2.1. Introductory Preamble

Just like France, Russia’s foreign policy choices have been driven first and foremost by its national interests. These complex decisions have affected relations between Paris and Moscow, leading to a varied deterioration in both duration and intensity. As in the first part of the chapter, this section will deconstruct the privileged relationship through the prism of Realpolitik concept. Firstly, it will examine the motives behind the rapprochement with France, and more generally Europe, and secondly, it will shed light on moments of opposition, when Russia didn’t hesitate to disengage itself from the Western stance. Various cases of international crises will be presented to support the argument with the same examples that have illustrated the chapter’s previous part. This choice has been taken on purpose in order to provide a comparison of both national interests, and contrast French diplomacy’s aims with Russian foreign policy rationale under review.

The story of Russia, from the Tsarist Empire to the Soviet Union, had been marked by the cold reality of supreme national interests. Whether dealing with internal issues or achieving

³⁴⁴ Isabelle Mandraud, “Syrie: Poutine Accuse La France, Valls Renvoie La Balle”, *Le Monde*, (October 12, 2016).

³⁴⁵ The Insider, “Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov Claims West ‘Sabotaged’ Minsk Agreements to Prepare for War against Russia – Here’s Why He’s Wrong,” *The Insider*, February 2, 2023.

foreign policy objectives, Moscow never hesitated to enforce the domination of its central power, often using extreme violence. In this way, any means were good as long as the strategy was serving the state's national interest. The various peoples that composed this gigantic territory and its neighborhoods have therefore suffered countless violations and abuses such as invasions, forced relocations, organised famine, massive deportations, or even pogroms. Even if national interest has not been continuous, adapting to diverse situations and contexts, one feature remained constant through the many centuries of Russian history: Moscow's foreign policy has always been addressed to satisfy its national interest. As A. Tsygankov recalled in the conclusion of his book: *"Overall, Russia confirms the old wisdom that foreign policy is as much a science of revealing some patterns of behavior as it is an art of following them by creatively synthesizing national and global imperatives"*.³⁴⁶

Hence, the Realpolitik logic is largely applicable to Russia's diplomatic strategy, and its relationship with France is no exception. When Moscow pursued closer ties with Paris, it was consistently guided by its core national interests. Russian leaders have therefore always been considering this approach when making decisive choices of foreign policy. In light of this assessment, two historical examples of diplomatic initiatives will be presented in order to demystify the narrative of a "natural entente" often fuelled by an age-old passion and great respect between both countries.

2.2. Cautious Moves Toward Rapprochement: Iraq and Ukraine

In this respect, the bilateral rapprochement during the war in Iraq is the first striking illustration. The previous section of the thesis has already proved that Paris, Berlin and Moscow convergence has not been achieved without doubts and hitches, and if this was true for the Western duo, it was almost even more the case for Russia. The time spent by Russian diplomacy to choose the direction - i.e., for V. Putin to finally make the decision - is uncontested evidence. As Iraq was at this time a major strategic issue for Moscow, the Russian leader took indeed a great deal of precaution before joining the "anti-war alliance". In 2003, Russia was hydrocarbons producer world's leader and was taking advantage of the Middle East

³⁴⁶ Andrei P. Tsygankov, "Conclusions and Lessons," in *Russia's Foreign Policy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 261–81.

destabilisation, in particular of the Iraqi war. Its economy - being extremely dependent on oil revenues as it still is the case - was not unsatisfied of the boost received by the rise in the oil barrel's price, which was directly linked to the crisis. This aspect, although quite unethical, has been scrupulously evaluated by Moscow, which was therefore playing in Iraq, a significant part its financial interests. Moreover, the fact that the Baghdad regime had never repaid the debt it had contracted to the Soviet Union - which amounted to around eight billion dollars - was pushing Russian diplomacy to exploit the situation even further.³⁴⁷

In addition, the wider opposition to American interventions and destabilisations via NATO - as it has been the case shortly before in Kosovo – reinforced the Russian's anti-war stance. Nevertheless, Russia's interests were also structurally focused on influencing the international scene in a desire to regain the great status lost since the end of the Cold War. In fact, Moscow wanted to weigh on world affairs and preserve its legitimacy within the UN Security Council. In front of this complex reality, V. Putin's foreign policy aimed to be as pragmatic as possible to settle strategic choices, explaining his long hesitation on these types of intricate geopolitical issues. Actually, for the Iraqi case, the Russian President tried for a long time to reach a compromise with his American counterpart, who seemed at the beginning ready to offer him guarantees.

Finally, any of these suggestions will satisfy Moscow and, not finding agreement with the White House, Russia rallied the "peace camp" led by Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schröder. One thing is thus clear, Vladimir Putin never appeared to be one of the leaders of this refusal front. As a matter of fact, the Kremlin has always allowed France and Germany to take the initiative in communicating, whereas each of his phone calls with George W. Bush was immediately relayed. In the same way, when the alliance passed the UN veto, France and Germany expressed their "hard work" to avoid this armed conflict, which they described as "the worst possible solution". In contrast, Russian diplomacy didn't bother with these kinds of moral and humanitarian justifications.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁷ Jean-Frédéric Saumont, "Irak - Le Double-Jeu de Vladimir Poutine," *RFI*, 2023.

³⁴⁸ Jean-Christophe Romer, "Les Relations Franco-Russes de 2000 à 2006. Entre Bilatéral et Multilatéral," *Centre Thucydide*, March 18, 2008.

Besides, Russia also sought to limit the repercussions of this veto, maintaining its cordial relations with the United States, which at the time was an important objective, as it was stressed. Analysing the crisis a few years later, the French specialist Thomas Gomart precisely recalled the opposition in the foreign policy's approaches, based on two completely different rationales: *"For Moscow, the incident is to some extent similar to the NATO intervention in Kosovo, which was led without a mandate from the United Nations. For Paris, Iraq is the perfect expression of the unilateralist U.S. inability to listen to its allies. After the invasion, this difference might be causing confusion between values and interests, and Paris is beginning to feel the consequences"*.³⁴⁹

To sum up, it is worth noting that, following these numerous fumbblings, Russian diplomacy opposed the war only after having carefully weighed up its national interests. Thus, the logic of Realpolitik applied perfectly to this half-tone commitment, which drove Russian foreign policy during the 2003 Iraqi crisis. Similar dynamics will interact during another rapprochement with France which, more than ten years later, was approved as peace negotiator for the territorial disputes in post-2014 Ukraine.

The eruption of the new events within the age-old conflicts in eastern Ukraine - previously detailed in the thesis - was contributing to a certain climate of tensions between the West and Russia. At the beginning of 2014, the annexation of Crimea was perceived as an additional provocation igniting the fire in the international community. The latter was indeed contesting the referendum monitored by the Kremlin under occupation, which was used to legitimise Russia's action.³⁵⁰ Considering Vladimir Putin's narrative, Crimea's affiliation to Russian territory from the very ancient time was justifying the annexation of this *"inseparable part of Russia"* which has been transfer twice in 1954 and 1991 with *"no consideration for the ethnic make-up of the population"* whose residents were *"handed overnight like a sack of potatoes"*.³⁵¹ Presence of pro-Russian and the demographic majority of ethnic Russians - around 60% - was reinforcing Moscow's territorial claim.

³⁴⁹ Thomas Gomart, *op. cit.*

³⁵⁰ Benoît Vitkine, "Le Scrutin Du Donbass Ravive La Tension Avec Kiev", *Le Monde*, November 3, 2014.

³⁵¹ Vladimir Putin, "Vladimir Putin Addressed State Duma Deputies, Federation Council Members, Heads of Russian Regions and Civil Society Representatives in the Kremlin", March, 18, 2014.

It is in this context that a dialogue was sought with France, and above all with the Franco-German couple, as Paris and Berlin were accepted to conduct together the negotiations under the aegis of the Normandy format. Isolated and controversial on the international stage, Russia saw in these diplomatic endeavors an opportunity to show it still had the approval of two European countries, which were willing to understand its perspective. Once again, Russia is finding a way to protect its interests by working with Germany and France. This strategy was not new within Russian diplomacy. In previous years, Vladimir Putin had already noticed and appreciated French positions' efforts to provide calm in the regional conflict bordering Russia, N. Sarkozy's involvement in resolving the Georgian conflict, first and foremost. Back in 2012, in his pre-election foreign policy manifesto, he presented France - along with Germany - as a *"driving force for the vitality of the European project"* and *"for anchoring Russia in Europe"*.³⁵²

At the time, the convergence on European security issues was rooted in a context of shared positions and interests, fuelled by traditional diplomatic lines of common understanding which had a certain echo in respective governments. Anchored in this tradition, Moscow's will to seek the "emancipation" of European countries from the United States has always been influential. Parallely, it provides comprehension on France's acceptance of this vision, as Paris' historical concern was to reduce the American impact on the continental security landscape, particularly regarding NATO and its enlargement. As it has been proved previously in the thesis, French different leaders used to see the "strong" relationship with Russia as a means of ensuring Europe's autonomy in political and security terms. This strategy was also advantageous to Russian diplomacy, which could count on reliable allies to defend the multipolar world approach, an ideal shared by both countries' foreign policies for many decades. In this context, Russia particularly welcomed Franco-German positions at the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, while expressing its willingness for solid rapprochement. In Moscow's view, the challenge was to forge closer ties in the name of common interests and visions, such as the fight against international terrorism or the imperative need to confront China's growing power. Hence, breaking the idea of a natural alliance in the name of a privileged relationship, Russia has therefore consistently followed its own interests in its rapprochement with France. As it has been the case for the Iraqi crisis, the logic of Realpolitik is totally relevant to this period.

³⁵² Isabelle Facon, "La Relation France-Russie à L'épreuve," ed. Université Panthéon Assas, *Annuaire Français de Relations Internationales* XVI (July 7, 2015).

2.3. The Normandy Format Failure

Concerning the Normandy Format and beyond the failure the Minsk agreements will prove to be, France's weight in the negotiations was also severely debated, further calling into question its status regarding Russia in Europe. Indeed, although Moscow had placed its trust in France in the early stage of the Ukrainian crisis, confidence deteriorated fairly quickly on the matter, as too sharp oppositions were revealing irreconcilable visions. Even at the start of the dialogues in 2014, the French and Russian leaders gave the impression that their interactions were far below the level of interaction that could have existed previously. The situation later became even rougher with a gradual loss of interest. More generally, the idea that Angela Merkel was largely driving the discussions was quite widespread within European diplomatic circles, leaving President Hollande in the role of passive spectator. Although these rumors cannot be officially checked, it does not contradict the impression of a French decline in Russia's consideration. Certainly, part of the negotiations, Paris was far from having the role of leader compared with Germany, as was the case in many areas, such as economic and energy sectors providing two striking examples. This bad press was also due to the gradual shifting witnessed by French foreign policy at the time. In fact, Paris was on many points firmer than Berlin when it comes to opposing the Kremlin's discourse on the moral decadence of the West. Moscow was noting the changing tone and strategy evolutions adopted by French diplomacy towards greater Atlanticism and interventionism. This context contributed to a growing preference for links with Germany, which was seen by Russian diplomacy as having greater - more efficient - influence on the European scene. This choice was further supported by the (much more) higher level of economic relations and interests between Russia and Germany, whereas a decline in trade was perceptible with France.

Moreover, Russia was interpreting this reversal as a loss of independence in French foreign policy. Paris' stance evolution on the "Ukrainian affair" was seen in this regard by Moscow as a "displayed Washington tailism", characterised by a form of "disenchantment" that had increased from the past five years. Indeed, the perception that France has lost its personality on the international stage by moving away from the Gaullist heritage was widespread in Russian diplomacy. The good relations with Paris started to be considered as pertaining to the past, almost regretting the period of the 5th Republic founder and his desire for a "Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals". This approach had marked Russian politics through the Cold War and had been later appreciated for transcending phases of tensions, such as Russia's military

intervention in Chechnya, severely criticised in France, or Serbia's NATO intervention, which was so decried in Russia. Things had changed from this time, where Russia had a unique place in the European political landscape, and Moscow started to be fully aware of it. Parallely, Paris was considered increasingly aligned with the positions of the United States and the most Atlanticist European countries. Its foreign policy guidelines appear to be more uncertain and less transparent, resulting in a situation where France was a less predictable partner while Russia deploring it, needed stability with its external relationships.³⁵³ In this regard, the French immediate recognition of Kosovo in 2008 – without assessing its relation with Russia – had been considered as a “*additional confirmation of France's shifting foreign policy line and its clear convergence with the United States*”.³⁵⁴

To offer another example linked with the Ukrainian conflict period, Russian officials severely deplored the absence of French reaction to the Secretary of State Victoria Nuland's bitter remarks about the European Union. In a phone conversation with the ambassador to Kiev, Geoffrey Pyatt - released a few years later - Mrs. Nuland distinctly evoked Washington's “preferences” for the “ideal” Ukrainian government in anticipation of the departure of Viktor Yanukovich, who was still in office.³⁵⁵ The historian Thomas Gomart recalls that the latter had been previously supported by the Russians “*in reaction to the revolution fuelled by Western influence*”.³⁵⁶ Unlike France and EU authorities, German Chancellor Angela Merkel took the opposite attitude and firmly denounced the incident, deploring in not-so-diplomatic terms “*absolutely unacceptable remarks*”.³⁵⁷

While the French and Russian positions are identical regarding the non-alternative status of the Minsk agreements, the parties have different understandings of the texts' substantive content. France's official position was indeed leaving room for context in the development of the crisis, focusing on the key security aspects it provided. This did not satisfy the Kremlin, whose field of vision was limited to the strict application of the Minsk Protocol's obligations. In the eyes of Moscow, the French interpretation of the crisis was intolerable and did not

³⁵³ David Cadier, “Continuity and Change in France's Policies towards Russia: A Milieu Goals Explanation,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 6 (November 1, 2018): 1349–69.

³⁵⁴ Isabelle Facon, *op. cit.*

³⁵⁵ Le Monde, “Ukraine: Des Enregistrements Clandestins Embarrassent Les États-Unis,” *Le Monde*, February 7, 2014.

³⁵⁶ Thomas Gomart, *op. cit.*

³⁵⁷ Ed Pilkington and Luke Harding, “Angela Merkel: Victoria Nuland's Remarks on EU Are Unacceptable,” *The Guardian*, February 7, 2014.

correspond at all to the real situation. In a report, State Duma MPs highlighted the Ukrainian government's constant refusal to organise a supervised referendum to settle the fate of the Lugansk and Donetsk regions, invoking constitutional inconsistency as a pretext for a regional plebiscite. Equally, they accused Kiev of punishing the people of the Donbas region with outrageous measures resulting in large numbers of refugees - the report put the figure at 600,000 - fleeing to Russia.³⁵⁸ While this has been largely contested, it is true that at the end of 2014, the Ukrainian government abrogated a law that granted a special status to the eastern regions of Ukraine, implementing both linguistic and cultural restrictions.³⁵⁹ ³⁶⁰ These policies were also accompanied by a strict economic regime for the territories held by the Russian separatists, even including the halting of pension payments and public subsidies.³⁶¹

There again, French reaction had been discreet on the issue, further losing its credibility in its relation of “trust” with the Kremlin. In this regard, Russian MPs in charge of foreign relations, addressing themselves to their French counterparts, added: “*the aggressor is the Ukrainian executive, Paris does not see the nationalist frenzy of the current leaders of Kiev, the heroism of Hitler’s accomplices, the violations of human rights and freedom of expression, to which the French authorities are generally so sensitive*”. Further on, they wondered about French reaction if the situation were reversed: “*One can only guess how France would react if, for example, in the event of a violent Anglonisation of Quebec, the Canadian authorities began to ban the use of the French language for teaching children in schools, to exclude French culture from the country’s public life or to stop broadcasting French TV*”.³⁶²

In more general terms, the Russians are progressively witnessing a diminution of interest in the dialogue they were maintaining with Paris and Berlin. Twice, the agreements signed through their diplomacy - Minsk I in 2014 and Minsk II in 2015 - have never been fully respected and implemented. On the one hand, Ukrainian authorities were denouncing Russian actions’ non-compliance with the provisions regarding the ceasefire and Donbas regional elections. On the other hand, internal political forces were blocking the Ukrainian government from voting the

³⁵⁸ Konstantin Kossatchev and Christian Cambon, “France-Russie : Dialogue Parlementaire Pour Rétablir La Confiance,” Sénat, 2018.

³⁵⁹ Olga Demidova, “The Council of Europe Called on Kyiv to Respect the Rights of Minorities,” *Deutsche Welle*, March 3, 2014.

³⁶⁰ Jamie Dettmer, “The Cost of Ukraine’s De-Russification,” *Politico*, August 26, 2022.

³⁶¹ Sébastien Gobert, “Kiev Ne Versera plus Ni Salaire, Ni Retraite Aux Habitants Du Donbass,” *RFI*, June 3, 2014.

³⁶² Konstantin Kossatchev and Christian Cambon, *op.cit.*

agreements.³⁶³ Russia was in this regard severely reproaching France and Germany to passively accepting these rejections, whereas their foreign ministers had just negotiated the final draft between V. Yanukovych and the main separatist forces. This passivity led Moscow to take Europe less seriously and to consider - rightly or wrongly - that the West objective to intervene in this political crisis was deliberately to tip Ukraine into the Euro-Atlantic camp, at the expense of interests deemed vital by the Russian government. This idea, which was gaining importance over time, included Paris and Berlin to an even greater extent due to the disappointment that ensued from the initial confidence they had been given.³⁶⁴

In the same way, Russia did not appreciate the sanctions imposed following the events in Ukraine. Numerous Russian oligarchs saw their assets hindered in Europe, doubled by a ban on visas for entry and transit through EU territory. For Moscow, this anti-Russian way of dealing with the problem over Minsk agreements was perceived as a useless strategy for both parts, including France, which was supporting these sanctions.

These implementations sounded in the minds of the Russian leaders as a despicable instrument of pressure on their country, imitating dangerously the character of US sanctions policy, which were progressively turning into a full-scale war against Russia. For the Russian diplomacy, it would generate high costs for Russia, whose links to the Europeans were incomparable with those of the Americans. Overall, economic sanctions had a direct impact on EU-Russia economic relations in several areas, and in general terms they act as a “psychological brake” on the business climate, which Moscow didn’t appreciate. In addition, it is worth noting that the Kremlin was also rejecting this method in principle, as a unilateral and illegal practice of sanctions without the approval of the UN Security Council. In this respect, as the EU was about to tighten these sanctions, Vladimir Putin warned at the 2014 G20 Summit in Brisbane: *“These sanctions go against the principles of the G20, and not only against its principles, but against international law, because they can only be taken by the United Nations and the Security Council”*.³⁶⁵

³⁶³ Roman Goncharenko, “Critics of the Minsk Agreement,” *Deutsche Welle*, October 30, 2015.

³⁶⁴ Isabelle Facon, *op. cit.*

³⁶⁵ Isabelle Mandraud, “Vladimir Poutine plus Isolé Que Jamais Au Sein Du G20”, *Le Monde*, November 16, 2014.

Frustration feelings gained therefore progressively the Russian diplomacy, having the impression that France and its European allies were only supporting Kiev's interpretation of the Ukrainian crisis' causes and motives, i.e., a sovereign Ukraine assaulted and occupied by the Russian aggressor. In this context, mutual understanding was becoming more complicated, creating a harsh climate to move forward diplomatically from which both sides' foreign policy choices did not emerge unscathed. Henceforth, as Russia's interests were no longer satisfied, the Kremlin had no point in maintaining dialogue with Paris and Berlin to reach a long-run solution to the conflict by negotiating peace with Kiev. Furthermore, to stifle any chance of Moscow's confidence return towards its ex European partners regarding this crisis, the German and French former leaders released two bombshell statements on the matter a few years later.

In two press interviews, the Normandy Format's main negotiators - firstly Angela Merkel and then François Hollande – claimed in 2022 that the Minsk agreements were nothing more than a way Ukraine to “*save precious time*” in order to “*strengthen its military strategy, to slow down Russian offensive and prepare optimally for an inevitable conflict*”.³⁶⁶ Inevitably, when these powerful words came out to the public, Russian diplomacy took it as a major blow, further affecting Euro-Russian relations and their future. In fact, a few days later, Vladimir Putin reacted with harshness commenting: “*From now, this raises obviously a question of trust, which at this point doesn't exist anymore*”.³⁶⁷

2.4. Political Dissent Catalysed in the Middle East

Consequently, Russian foreign policy, being therefore principally guided by its national premium interest, didn't hesitate to drastically change its approach towards France around this period. This reversal further verified that Moscow's diplomatic agenda was following the Realpolitik concept, opposing different strategies on many international issues. Two examples are presented to shed light on the emerging distance with France, driven by Russia's national interest dissatisfaction.

³⁶⁶ Theo Prouvost, “Hollande: ‘There Will Only Be a Way out of the Conflict When Russia Fails on the Ground’”, *The Kyiv Independent*, December 28, 2022.

³⁶⁷ Mikhail Kotlyar, “We Insisted, They Ignored.’ the Kremlin Explained the Reasons for the Special Operation,” *Gazeta.ru*, December 11, 2022.

As previously analysed from the French foreign policy perspective, the Syrian issue constitutes the first example. If the context of the civil war has already been portrayed, this part will essentially focus on the Russian perception of the French positions on the matter. Issues in the Middle East were already the result of divergence between Paris and Moscow, in particular in the assessment of the Arab Spring events. The positions on the mass protest movements against corrupt authoritarian regimes were fundamentally opposed. Although France had established close ties with Arab leaders in the past - Z. Ben Ali in Tunisia, H. Mubarak in Egypt, M. Gaddafi in Libya - its foreign policy had reversed showing interest in a new generation of educated young secularists that was coming to replace them, ready to create democratic regimes following the Western model. This led to the conclusion that they needed all the support they could get, including armed intervention without UN Security Council sanction. Although this new approach was part of American logic through NATO, France was seeking to take leadership by increasing intervention suggestions. In this context, N. Sarkozy sent special forces to Libya, contributing to the assassination of his Prime Minister M. Gaddafi. In a constant opposition, Russia's foreign policy has always shown great opposition to foreign interference which, for the Kremlin, would contribute to the destabilisation of political regimes. The results of the international coalition in Tripoli have proved to be in this sense a great failure. Libya's state structures collapsed, the country was plunged into a bloody inter-tribal warfare, and the instability favoured the strengthening of Islamist groups such as Al-Qaeda and what later became ISIS. Flows of arms and mercenaries poured across the Sahel countries, forcing France to resort to further armed intervention. After this sad experience Moscow was providing to stimulate dialogue between the forces in the east and west of Libya in the fight against Islamist jihadists.³⁶⁸

When the Syrian crisis broke out, Moscow was aiming to avoid "similar tragic mistakes" made by Paris and the international coalition. In this regard, Russia remained fixed to the tradition of its foreign policy, supporting the Syrian regime and helping it to retain power. This support was also fuelled by the desire to consolidate Russian influence in the Middle East, with diverse geostrategic interests on the ground. Conserving its historical Syrian ally on its side, V. Putin could regain a foothold in the region and reconstitute a whole power strategy vis-à-vis the West. Diplomatic tensions broke out from the outset of the crisis as France adopted a completely different stance, supporting the opposition President B. Assad. For the Kremlin, by providing

³⁶⁸ Konstantin Kossatchev and Christian Cambon, *op. cit.*

its political and material support to the armed rebels, France has indirectly contributed to the emergence of the Islamist groups in the country, which evolved into a self-proclaimed “Islamic Caliphate”. Without considering the regime’s war crimes, Russian diplomacy - primarily focusing on the fight against terrorism - gave therefore the blame on the Western coalition for the deaths of 260,000 people and the forced migration of 3 to 4 million, including to Europe.³⁶⁹ Later, the 2015 attacks created Moscow’s hope that Paris would be prompted to change its foreign policy. These Islamist bloody attacks had shocked Russian people and diplomats, who seemed convinced of an inevitable reversal in the fight against jihadist groups in Syria. When this didn’t happen, the Russian press was generally harsh with French management of the situation, speaking of “*F. Hollande’s misdirection*”, which reflected part of the country’s reaction.³⁷⁰

Moscow wasn’t appreciating France’s insistence on the departure of Bashar al-Assad as a precondition for any settlement of the crisis. This situation led to a diplomatic freeze between the two countries, embodied by the 2016 cancellation of Vladimir Putin’s trip to Paris. Here again, Russian journalists were talking about an “*unprecedented situation in bilateral relations*”.³⁷¹

Although Emmanuel Macron’s arrival to power marked a new phase regarding the crisis. The positions didn’t witness big changes over Syria, lacking common ground to find a political settlement, even if Moscow welcomed Paris slight evolution on the absolute condition of B. al Assad’s resignation that invited more flexibility. However, Russia still had difficulties seeing France’s position as constructive for a peaceful settlement of the conflict on the basis of multilateralism approval and respect for political transition and religious minorities. The civil war in Syria has been going on for almost fifteen years and is not even finished, even with Bashar al Assad’s recent downfall. In 2025, a Russian delegation met Damascus’ new government for the first time in order for Moscow to negotiate the maintenance of its two military bases in the country - especially the highly strategic Tartus naval base - crucial for the influence in the African continent.³⁷²

³⁶⁹ Konstantin Kossatchev and Christian Cambon, *op. cit.*

³⁷⁰ Igor Gachkov, “Pour Le Kremlin, Hollande Se Fourvoie”, *Courrier International*, October 20, 2016.

³⁷¹ Radio France Internationale, “Visite Annulée de Poutine: La Presse Russe Évoque Un Climat de Guerre Froide,” *RFI*, October 11, 2016.

³⁷² Isabelle Facon, *op. cit.*

Hence, Russia's foreign policy in Syria has consistently been driven by its national interests—whether focused on military objectives, regional influence, security concerns, or combating radical Islam. The resulting clash with Paris demonstrates once again that the Realpolitik concept is more likely to apply to Russia's political choices impacting cooperation and further breaking the myth of a “privileged relationship”. Syria has been one of the most contentious international crises in Franco-Russian relations, shedding light on their gradual deterioration over the last decade.

The Ukrainian crisis or the conflicting interests around the Middle East issues have been worth to prove Russia's foreign policy dependence on interests' satisfaction. In these cases, as many others, it didn't hesitate to reorient its strategy towards France when national priorities were at stake, always fitting with the Realpolitik logic. To further deconstruct the myth of special bonds, the third part of this section explores two additional factors involved in Russian foreign policy and showing that Moscow progressively found itself at odds with France and Europe. In fact, the NATO enlargement and the respect for international law, norms, and values are relevant examples further contributing to this growing distance.

3. Additional Entrenched Cleavages

*“The expansion of NATO is not a military problem;
it is a psychological one”*³⁷³

Yevgeny Primakov, Minister of Foreign Affairs, 1996

*“We have entered a period of differing interpretations and deliberate
silences in world politics. International law has been forced to retreat
over and over by the onslaught of legal nihilism”*³⁷⁴

Vladimir Putin, 2014

3.1. Russia and NATO

Regarding geographically closer areas, the issues around NATO have been a source of great tensions between Russia and the West, including France’s evolving interpretation of the matter. The organisation’s enlargements eastwards - one of Moscow’s most sensitive issues - has frequently resulted in numerous disputes between the two countries, Paris oscillating between a policy of understanding and disapproval of the Russian rationale but never totally opposing the Atlantic bloc.

Russia has always considered NATO - albeit officially a defensive alliance - as a threat justifying its defence budget’s increase, accelerating for years the modernisation of its military resources. In the Cold War aftermath, conflicts and tensions emerged in the former Soviet space with two competing movements. Russia has been seeking to oppose NATO enlargement and all forms it could take - the new members, military build-up, partnerships or political and institutional influence - whereas the Western-Atlanticist bloc was encouraging the inverse path. For Moscow, territories of its former glacis were legitimately considered as “privileged zone of influence” in which a great part of its security interests depended. This way of seeing and playing with these countries has been embodying Russia’s Realpolitik since 1991, allowing no interpretation beyond the primacy of national interests, even if this means adopting policies that may appear aggressive or destabilising. The Kremlin took therefore a dim view of each of the

³⁷³ Leonid Mlechin, *Ministry Inostrannykh Del: Romantiki I Tsiniki*, (Tsentrpoligraf, 2001), 620.

³⁷⁴ Vladimir Putin, “Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, President of Russia, Sochi”, October 24, 2014.

“Colour Revolutions” that arose in former USSR republics - mainly Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) - with a strong will of independence and adhesion to institutions such as the EU or NATO. For Moscow, this was a synonym of losing influence and control in countries deemed as vital spaces or even regions of belonging, for some of them.³⁷⁵

The internal divisions in the Russian political landscape that had been previously presented had led to changes in foreign policy. These visions didn’t allow same approaches and lead to same choices, and the strategy for dealing with NATO is no exception. Nevertheless, these deep differences didn’t prevent Russia from having a clear assumption on NATO issues and enlargement -which was predominant in most of Russian schools of thought - and what it could represent for Moscow’s influence.

The historian Andrei Tsygankov underlines it very well when he says: “*Many in Russia saw the expansion as the most serious foreign policy challenge and made their opposition to the process explicitly. The expansion was incomprehensible in light of Russia’s historical commitments, its new relationships with the Western countries, and the West’s own promises not to expand the alliance (...) The general public, too, expressed concerns, and those concerns only increased over time.*”³⁷⁶ To encapsulate this last feeling even more clearly, he even quotes US former Defence Secretary, William Perry, who in 1999 said: “*The Russian reaction to NATO enlargement was ranged from being unhappy to being very unhappy and being a very widely and very deeply held view in Russia*”.³⁷⁷

To reinforce this perspective, it is worth noting that this threat was felt by the broader Russian society which globally shared the views of its leaders on NATO enlargement as an anti-Russian process and essentially, an American unipolar hegemony. Overall media contributed to this climate of fear, frequently referring to Western actions and methods through the prism of the encirclement theory, claiming that US and NATO troops were provoking Russia. In this respect, the pro-government newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* was already warning with concern in 2002: “*One way or another, Russia, the entire former USSR, remains encircled by a dense ring of military and intelligence-gathering installations belonging to the North Atlantic Alliance*”.³⁷⁸

³⁷⁵ Konstantin Kossatchev and Christian Cambon, *op. cit.*

³⁷⁶ Andrei P. Tsygankov, “New Security Challenges and Great Power Balancing,” in *Russia’s Foreign Policy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 97–135.

³⁷⁷ *Ibidem.*

³⁷⁸ Sergey Ptichkin and Aleksei Chichkin, “From Where Russia Is Clearly Visible,” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, January 22, 2002.

At first, Russia was rather thankful for the comprehensive stance that had been traditionally offered by Paris on the matter. As it developed in previous parts, France's interest to gain European independence favoured prudence regarding NATO enlargement or anti-missile defence more generally. During the USSR's collapse, François Mitterrand personally gave Mikhail Gorbachev his support for the dismantling of military blocs and a European security architecture necessarily including Russia. In 1991, the French President saw in the NATO enlargement towards former countries of the Warsaw Pact as an "*unwelcome manoeuvre to encircle Russia*", which he would be "*the first to oppose*".³⁷⁹ Later in the same vein, Russia appreciated Paris' various decisions - often alongside Germany - like the 2008 Bucharest summit's opposition to enlargement or the criticism of G.W. Bush administration's plans to deploy anti-missile assets in Poland and the Czech Republic. Before the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, an important part of French elites was still admitting that the US and certain European countries were largely responsible for Russia's distance from the West.

For Moscow however, Paris had never pushed this logic to conclusion, converting this opposition into concrete actions. On the contrary, Russian leaders had the impression that Paris was gradually reversing its approach and positions. France and Europe were most of the time perceived only in terms of their strategic relationship with NATO, and their diplomats were constantly accused of being "vassals" of America. These observations underpinned the analysis made by Russian diplomacy on the diminution of France's relative weight in Europe in the post-Cold War period. This perception was the result of a double reason, i.e., the affirmation of a reunified Germany on the one hand, and the enlargement of the EU to include Central and Eastern European countries on the other. This made France a less "useful" partner - as it has been before - in terms of Moscow's interest to increase its influence on the European political and security scene. On this matter, Isabelle Facon gave an insightful standpoint: "*As the Kremlin saw it, Paris had failed to give the European Union any real substance as a security player, while Russian leaders were counting on the affirmation of Europe's own identity in this area to respond to its well-known concern to see NATO's role on the European stage diminish, of which France's determination had been overestimated with no doubt by the Russian authorities*".³⁸⁰

³⁷⁹ François Mitterrand, "Conférence de Presse du Président de La République, à l'Issue Du Sommet de l'OTAN, Sur Le Rôle de L'OTAN, l'Identité Européenne En Matière de Défense et Sur Le Risque de Dissémination des Armes Nucléaires En URSS, à Rome", 8, November, 1991.

³⁸⁰ Isabelle Facon, *op.cit.*

3.2. The NATO Enlargement

Later, part of Russian diplomacy even considered that, driven by the desire to regain its influence in Europe, Paris had decided strategically to align itself with the positions of the US and the Central and Eastern European allies, influencing its foreign policy. The Kremlin perceived that Paris was “sacrificing” the “Russian dimension” of its traditional approach supporting continental balances. Like other Western nations, France was considered to be passively supportive of the former Soviet states’ bid for NATO membership, displaying for the Russians, an attitude perceived as increasingly hegemonic. While maintaining what it judges to be a right to protect itself, Russia sharpened its negative perception of the West. In this context of relations deteriorating rapidly between Europe and Russia, the objective of Russia was to strengthen its relative weight and find new powers to count on. In this respect, Moscow placed less emphasis on the partnership with France, in the idea of devoting less effort to a connection that a majority of Russian leaders came to regard as no longer offering positive results. This tendency further dispelled the myth of special bonds. Against this backdrop, Russia tended additionally to underestimate its own share of responsibility for the distance observed in the interaction with Paris, exclusively drawing attention to this Atlanticist turn, viewed as the main factor in the negative development of the bilateral relationship.³⁸¹

France’s changes in foreign policy, pursuing State interests, were indeed in total contrast with Russian national and strategic concerns. The Kremlin had continuously seen NATO developments - principally military expansion near its border - as threatening its domestic security, and indicating at the same time, its total disagreement with Western explanations. During the signing of the NATO-Russia Founding Act in Paris in 1997, Russia obtained a written commitment from the organisation’s heads ensuring NATO would not deploy substantial fighting forces on the territories of new members (Central and Eastern European countries that were to join the Alliance). Finally, this had occurred at different moments in Romania, Poland or the Baltics, increasing the movement after 2014. In this regard, NATO always made clear that these political decisions were taken in a specific context - post Crimea annexation, and even further after 2022 – in which the security situation of Europe had changed radically and was suggesting necessary reactions while Russia had violated other acts,

³⁸¹ Isabelle Facon, *op.cit.*

particularly the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and the 1994 Budapest Memorandum.³⁸² Nevertheless, Moscow considered NATO to have betrayed its 1997 promise, drastically increasing forces deployment after different summit decisions. To further accentuate this rationale, Russian leaders have been also frequently referring to a non-formal commitment made in 1990, where for three times in a meeting in Moscow, US Secretary of State James Baker assured Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs Eduard Shevardnadze that NATO would expand “not one inch eastwards” if Germany was reunited. This oral declaration, albeit non-legally binding, has been interpreted since this time as a broken promise, constantly exerting tension on the issue. Besides, years after, V. Putin referred to this period of collapse suggesting that, rather than seeing NATO extending, the ideal arrangement in the 1990s would have been a separate alliance encompassing all Central Europe with the joint participation of both Soviet Union and the United States.³⁸³ Instead, a few months after the USSR’s collapse, in early 1991, the first applications for NATO membership arrived from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Romania. France, with the great majority of the NATO Council - thirteen countries out of the sixteen total members - totally opposed this enlargement, fearing destabilisation. NATO’s Secretary General Manfred Wörner ending negotiations with a Russian delegation declared with assurance: “*We should not allow the USSR to be isolated*”.³⁸⁴

Russia maintained the same diplomatic stance 17 years later during new negotiations concerning closer neighbours, having witnessed ever since the accession of ten countries to the Alliance, four of which sharing a border with its territory. At the 2008 Bucharest meeting, even if it managed to block (or limit) the Georgia and Ukraine Membership Action Plans, Russia already expressed its criticism on the promise made to these countries for joining NATO in the future, contributing to new lines of division between nations of a “common history”. In this regard, President Dmitry Medvedev asserted in 2008: “*We consider that these facts are extremely embarrassing for the existing structures of European security. No state would like to see representatives of a military alliance to which it does not belong approaching its borders*”.³⁸⁵

³⁸² Andrei P. Tsygankov, “U.S. Regime Change Strategy and Great Power Assertiveness,” in *Russia’s Foreign Policy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 177–209.

³⁸³ Roy Allison, “Russia and the Post-2014 International Legal Order: Revisionism and Realpolitik,” *International Affairs*, no. 93, 2017, 519–43.

³⁸⁴ Philippe Descamps, “L’OTAN Ne S’étendra Pas d’Un Pouce Vers L’est”, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 2018.

³⁸⁵ France 24, “Medvedev Critique l’Expansion de L’Otan”, *France 24*, March 25, 2008.

Some scholars established direct connections between the Western behaviour and the climate of tensions in which different conflicts emerged in the Black Sea Basin (i.e., South Ukraine, North-West Georgia and East Moldova). Among these experts, Andrei Tsygankov even formulated the idea that NATO's actions had partly precipitated - or at least accelerated to transform - these crises into wars. He said indeed in this regard: "*The conflict with Georgia and Ukraine, too, became possible in part because the balance of power in the region had long ago been violated by NATO's and the EU's decisions to expand its infrastructure at the expense of Russia's interests*".³⁸⁶

To counter these plans, the Kremlin developed the strategy of using the so-called "frozen conflicts" as leverage for limiting NATO's ongoing east-proliferation, backing pro-Russian separatists in different regions - mainly Crimea, Donbas, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transnistria - of the three sovereign countries just cited. Beyond this political turmoil generated, Russia engaged itself as well in a more diplomatic path, developing similar constructive cooperations through its own organisation known as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) - in which different countries participated from Eastern Europe to Asia and the Caucasus. Moreover, it is worth noting that during these post-Cold War years, Moscow was also obsessed - probably with a dose of nostalgia - by the paradoxical foreign policy objective of reestablishing a dialogue with Washington on peer-to-peer bases.

For decades, France has been juggling between its allies' interests and arguments, focusing therefore its objective in seeking dialogue with everyone. However, the consequences of this balancing strategy have resulted in a sort of disparate actions forming a foreign policy blurred and most of the time misinterpreted by Russia. In this respect, different moments failed to satisfy Russian interests on NATO issues rendering Paris a partner on which Moscow couldn't count anymore. France's participation in Kosovo's intervention in 1999 - and later its immediate recognition of independence in 2008 - contributed indeed to this tendency as well as the passive reactions to the overall NATO strengthening with deployed armies on direct borders, increasing Russian fears. In addition, on this last point, the French contingent's direct involvement in military programmes - exercises and trainings - in the Baltics and Poland, further intensified tensions. Despite Moscow's serious irritation, France even reinforced this commitment after the 2016 NATO summit in Warsaw, further constraining Russia's core

³⁸⁶ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *op. cit.*, 261–81.

interests. This has certainly been interpreted by Russian diplomacy as a symptom of a growing normalisation of French foreign policy's alignment with the NATO standards. Hence, seen as a "tool" of the American policy in Europe, NATO has proved to be a constant obstacle to an in-depth dialogue on European security, in spite of numerous attempts. This structural limit allowed Moscow to be increasingly reticent and distrustful of the constructivist diplomacy practised by Paris, increasing Russia's disregard for international law and, more generally, European values and standards.³⁸⁷

3.3. Russian Volatility in Compliance with European Values

From 2007 onwards, by pursuing indeed a more coercive and less compromising foreign policy – particularly in relation to post-Soviet space – Moscow's decisions were increasingly in opposition to the European security framework. Challenging the norms and some regimes' order and structure, the Russian foreign policy showed its resilience to its objectives and interests, even if a large part of the world community was denouncing international law's repeated violations. France was no exception to this contestation, stressing for a long time Russia's failures to comply with standards. In 1980, François Mitterrand was already underlining these problems, recalling Moscow to respect its obligations when he declared: "*I believe our friendship is essential for the European balance, but friendship is not based on complacency*".³⁸⁸

With this last word, beyond protesting to Russian denial of international law and human rights norms, the French President was emphasising his country's commitment to make them respect. In the same manner, French diplomacy progressively shifted, clearly identifying Russia's tendency to evolve towards the international legal order's non-compliance. In its 2008 foreign policy "white book", analysts evoked it as follows: "*Russia has played a partial part in defining the post-Cold War order. It is following a specific trajectory, which is a source of questions as it has hardened its position vis-à-vis the Europeans, the Americans and some of its neighbours*".³⁸⁹

³⁸⁷ Konstantin Kossatchev and Christian Cambon, *op. cit.*

³⁸⁸ Laurent Coumel, "François Mitterrand et L'URSS", *Matériaux Pour l'Histoire de Notre Temps*, no. 1, 2011, 32–34.

³⁸⁹ Alain Juppé and Louis Schweitzer, "La France et l'Europe Dans Le Monde: Livre Blanc Sur La Politique Étrangère et Européenne de La France", 2008.

Thus, on the foreign front, Moscow's desire for international recognition has been directly manifested in its diplomatic activity, which was characterised by a dual objective of maximising its energetic leverage and amplifying claims of national sovereignty. French diplomacy was remarking Russia's hardening of domestic policy and taking with great attention its potential slippery evolution into further threatening external actions. Its behaviour was interpreted as taking a neo-imperialist path, marked by aggressive investment in foreign markets and a will to assert dominance over its near-abroad regions, such as Georgia and Ukraine. This turn was impacting multiple sections of Franco-Russian relations, from economic assets to moral principles, and increasingly revealed the risks that could arise from this dynamic. In his analysis, the historian Thomas Gomart explained this trend, extending the concept to the relation to the West in general: "*An undemocratic regime is a threat not only to its own citizens and neighbours, but also to its partners. Abnormal politically, economically, and strategically, Russia is not, from this perspective, able to pursue a "normal" foreign policy according to Western criteria*".³⁹⁰

The shifting of Russia's foreign policy over this period has therefore been severely disapproved by Paris, who expressed a double rejection of its approach, refusing on the one hand, the geopolitical competition over European common neighbourhood, and on the other, Moscow's action breaking international law and European values.³⁹¹

To contest this last criticism, Russia used to develop over time what scholars had called "legal revisionism", indicating the process practised by Moscow to minimise its misconduct and legitimise its actions, with a rationale promoting Realpolitik on all the rest. In this regard, Eurasian expert, Roy Allison, shed light on this theory by addressing the notion to the 2014 annexation of Crimea and military intervention in eastern Ukraine. Both represented indeed a major break in the post-Cold War international legal order and in the Russian commitment to traditional sovereignty norms. According to him, unlike previous Western interventions, a major power used force in order to expand its territorial sphere, defying fundamental principles of the UN Charter, including the prohibition on the use of force and respect for national sovereignty. By violating these pillars, Russia entered a new phase in which it explicitly affronted the rule-governed order that had been uncontested so far, as it was the international law system's modern basis. Isolated by non-obtaining international support for its actions,

³⁹⁰ Thomas Gomart, *op. cit.*

³⁹¹ David Cadier, *op. cit.*

Russia had recourse to a strategic instrument of revising legal rationale in order to justify the use of force in the European territorial order. This discourse was, for example, considering the CIS states - and ex-Soviet more generally - as partially sovereign, admitting hierarchy in a sort of “legal” zone of exception in which security issues couldn’t be dealt without Moscow. Roy Allison said in this regard: *“Actions are surrounded by contested facts and deniability. Russia asserts a claim to a form of legal exceptionalism in a regional zone of entitlements, formed of most of the post-Soviet CIS neighbourhood. In this region, the principles Russia defends in the wider international system seem fungible or simply non-applicable”*.³⁹²

To emphasise this phenomenon, the Professor suggests that Russia had used the spectrum of the “Colour Revolutions” to influence other states on the international stage as well as the “threat of regime change” used to mobilise internal and external support. These narratives have been used to reflect a vision of the world in which the West is seen as an actor seeking to destabilise political regimes, thus justifying Russian interventions as legitimate defensive measures. These various claims of complex case law, along with a curious interpretation of self-determination, contributed with efficacy to creating some confusion within the international community of states. Together with these strategic approaches, Russian diplomacy referred with insistence to concrete examples such as the Syrian crisis or the international recognition of Kosovo to wisely validate its discourse through questionable analogies. Russia’s method consisted of adopting international legal standards into its discourse, even appropriating some elements of Western humanitarian rhetoric.

In 2014, Vladimir Putin declared in this respect: *“I will add that international relations must be based on international law, which itself should rest on moral principles such as justice, equality and truth. Perhaps most important is respect for one’s partners and their interests. This is an obvious formula, but simply following it could radically change the global situation. If there is an area where Russia could be a leader - it is in asserting the norms of international law”*.³⁹³

³⁹² Roy Allison, *op.cit.*

³⁹³ Vladimir Putin, *op.cit.*

3.4. Downward Spiral

These tensions, which 2014 was the catalyst, have increased over the last decade, creating a vicious cycle: the more the West has denounced Russia's values, the more Moscow has embraced an imperial posture. Russia always saw Washington's push for democracy as a destabilising force and responded defensively. Additionally, this dynamic was beneficial for strengthening Russian power domestically, as the stronger the Kremlin appears in defying international criticism, the more its popularity grows within the country. This strategy entered the pragmatism of the Russian President's foreign policy, who since the late 2000s increasingly sought support from non-Western bloc in influencing the rule setting, challenging US presumption on international law interpretation, and building new ties with tactical actors such as China or the BRICS states, i.e., Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, et al. Parallely, the Russian regime - increasingly after 2010 - positioned itself as the defender of conservative traditions and societal values in the face of the neo-liberalism and individualism of Western societies whereas Russia had fully integrated the globalisation movement, opening its market to world exchanges. In his work, Roy Allison highlighted the complexity of Russia's strategy, which combines elements of legal discourse with concrete actions aimed at changing the European territorial and security order in its favour. In the end, Russia has therefore navigated between legal revisionism and realpolitik to redefine the post-2014 international order, justifying its actions on "*irredentist grounds of "historic justice"*".³⁹⁴

Having previously reasserted its global power status - in great part through the energetic leverage - Russia has entered, since these wars and invasions, in a phase marked economically and politically by aggressiveness, heightening its assertiveness while affecting durably its partnerships with Europe. As a co-UNSC member, Paris has badly received these repeated breaches of basic international rules, which it considered as weakening both Russia's reputation and bilateral relations, along with multilateralism in general.³⁹⁵ The French distance and criticisms were all the same unappreciated by Moscow, which didn't limit itself to denouncing with bitterness - and sometimes vehemence - Paris and the West's interpretations of certain actions and disregard for Russian interests.

³⁹⁴ Roy Allison, *op.cit.*

³⁹⁵ Thomas Gomart, *op. cit.*

In this respect, Vladimir Putin never minced his words, like in 2015 when he blamed Western hypocrisy very clearly at the UN General Assembly annual debate: *“We are accused of having disproportionate ambitions. As if those who accuse us had no ambitions at all. We can no longer tolerate the current situation, and it’s not a question of ambitions: we are basing ourselves on values, on international law”*.³⁹⁶

Without directly accusing any country, it’s evident that Paris was just as much targeted as Berlin or Washington. Once again, France’s ability to conduct an independent foreign policy was continually called into question. On the contrary, the French political establishment increasingly assumed its negative perception of Russia, which was badly perceived in Moscow. In 2017, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs contained direct accusations of this Russian strategy in its annual strategic survey on defense and security questions. The authors denounced without reserve: *“While denouncing “Western expansionism”, Russia is seeking to weaken the transatlantic link and divide the European Union. In a way unseen since the Cold War, it is developing a policy of assertiveness on all fronts (eastern flank, Mediterranean, Syria, Balkans) and in all fields”*. The image of Russia as a country with an *“authoritarian form of government, where political opposition is allegedly oppressed, freedom of expression is suppressed and the rule of law is not respected”* was therefore already cultivated at official level.³⁹⁷

In 2018, Russian MPs of the Foreign Affairs Committee responded to these charges, stating: *“Building future relations on such a foundation is unlikely to work. It is necessary to change the basic attitude, from confrontation and restraint towards Russia to a mutually beneficial cooperation that is destroyed by an arbitrary treatment of international law”*.³⁹⁸

Hence, since 2014, Russia has increasingly witnessed its leaders being accused of severely breaching international law. Moscow always refuted them by fundamentally opposing Western interpretations, arguing that human rights were used as an instrument of political pressure and instrumentalised against developing countries. These growing tensions had therefore great repercussions also in Russia’s French policy, further contesting the “double standards” Paris was fueling in the overall Western behaviour.

³⁹⁶ Jacques Sapir, “Poutine à L’ONU”, *Marianne*, September 29, 2015.

³⁹⁷ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, “Revue Stratégique de Défense et de Sécurité Nationale”, 2017.

³⁹⁸ Konstantin Kossatchev and Christian Cambon, *op. cit.*

With the latest developments of the Ukrainian crisis and the 2022 Russian aggression, the situation took a sharp turn, giving rise to strong reactions from the Western countries. France was not an exception condemning firmly the Kremlin's actions and fitting with this logic of rupture. This period provides new evidence for the refutation of the so-called “privileged relation”. Contrarily to what this narrative might have suggested, French diplomacy had in fact been one of the most outspoken critics against Moscow in Europe during this period. Inherited from the Gaullist traditional approach of Russia, the very last features of understanding dialogue were totally reverted, considered as irrelevant and no longer adapted to the Eurasian relations and how they had evolved over the last 15 years. In this respect, 2022 was a new turning point leading to an unparalleled diplomatic breakdown.

4. Russia's Asian Challenges

*“Today it is obvious that global problems just cannot be resolved without Asia. True, some may try to do so due to inertia and outdated mentality, but the legitimacy and, what is most important, practical sense and value of such solutions that are expected to be global and universal, will be rather doubtful”*³⁹⁹

Vladimir Putin, 2019

*“Today, in the face of unilateralist countercurrents, bullying and acts of power politics, China is working with Russia to shoulder the special responsibilities of major countries”*⁴⁰⁰

Xi Jinping, 2025

4.1. Longstanding Policy Orientation

In this context of isolation, Russia strongly reoriented its foreign policy towards Asia; however, this initiative is rooted in deeper dynamics, as Russian diplomacy had already recognised and leveraged the opportunities that this continent could offer. In fact, Asia had been part of Russian foreign policy for a long time, particularly through the Statist school of thought, which influenced the thinking in reaching out to Central and South Asian countries in order to counterbalance the dominance of the West. Yevgeni Primakov's period at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs embodied this approach in the late Cold War aftermath. In fact, one of his first proposals after his access to power has been to develop an strategic alliance with China and India, with the aim of freeing Russia from Western influence and gaining independence in his external plans. Even if Statists had been more limited just after the USSR's collapse, Y. Primakov's goal was to restore the great status of his country, counting on Eurasian bonds to build new partnerships. At the outset, he opted for fuelling new ties with former Soviet republics, addressing security threats in regions which were witnessing military conflicts or civil wars - such as Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and even Armenia - through recurrent diplomatic endeavours.⁴⁰¹

³⁹⁹ TASS, “Impossible to Resolve Global Problems without Asia, Says Putin,” *TASS*, October 3, 2019.

⁴⁰⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The People's Republic of China, “President Xi Jinping Holds Talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin,” May 8, 2025.

⁴⁰¹ Andrei P. Tsygankov, “New Security Challenges and Great Power Balancing,” in *Russia's Foreign Policy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 97–135.

Moreover, Russia was perceiving as well great vulnerability from Western external actions in neighbours' regions and redirected strategically its foreign policy towards non-Western countries. To the detriment of its relations with the Old Continent, Moscow returned to improve these long-standing relations, which had been abandoned by Westernist leaders - mainly M. Gorbachev and A. Kozyrev - whose policies had completely neglected Asian and Middle East countries and isolated former Soviet republics. Both were seeing any advantage from these territories, as far as considering non-Western countries as undemocratic, old-fashioned, and anti-progressive.⁴⁰² This Russian passivity towards its Eastern direction came however rapidly to an end, shifting suddenly under Boris Yeltsin when Russia's foreign policy reversed and Global South became for the first time a primary objective. Russian leaders saw new challenges and potential opportunities in the Asian territory, either Southeast Asia or Central Asia, particularly countries of the former Soviet glacis, where Russian influence dated back some time and was still prominent. In particular, Russia intensified its relationship with the CIS member states, drawing closer political ties but also regarding many segments such as culture, military, and science.⁴⁰³

Since the late 20th century, Russia has been implementing a new Asian strategy in its foreign policy, relying on its "triangle" with China and India, but also with other powerful states such as Iran, Iraq, Japan or Vietnam. Insisting on the fear of Western actions - particularly with NATO enlargement issues or international law disputes - and reaffirming its cultural old-heritage legacy, Moscow attempted to limit Western domination, promoting a multipolar world politics, in particular against American hegemony. These elements contributed to Russian foreign policy's re-empowerment, receiving in addition massive popular support for this restructuring pathway. Vladimir Putin's new shift in foreign strategy continued in the same direction, even more pragmatically, as relations with Asia and other developing countries - especially within the G20 or the BRICS - have been increasingly encouraged. At an early stage of his political term, he took fully into consideration the Eurasianist dimension in Russia's identity and national interest. As a matter of fact, in 1999, while not yet President, he organised an important trip visiting five key Central Asian states: China, India, Mongolia, North Korea and Brunei. Strategic partnerships were therefore prioritised in Asia in many sectors such as economic, energy, defence, etc. Already in 2002, India and China were Russia's largest buyers,

⁴⁰² Andrei P. Tsygankov, "The Post-Cold War Euphoria and Russia's Liberal Westernism," in *Russia's Foreign Policy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 59–97.

⁴⁰³ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *op. cit.*, 97–135.

accounting for a large part of military material, of which the Russian export rose dramatically in the following years. In 2008, the share of these two countries in the total Russian arms purchase even reached 90%.⁴⁰⁴ Besides, beyond selling guns, Russia assisted India for many years in its nuclear program and built as well various nuclear reactors in Iran. In addition, energy has been an area of great cooperation with Asia. Indeed, agreements were signed to provide many countries with hydrocarbons, and to negotiate with others the transportation of these natural resources with tax and customs deals. Almost all the Caspian region and Arabian Peninsula were integrated into this plan, to which even Japan actively participated, approving a giant pipeline project which connected its sea to Siberian oil supplies via the city of Nakhodka. A similar project has been reached with China, symbolised by the energy issues objectives discussed during the first trip of the former President Hu Jintao to Russia in 2003. More generally, Asia has been one of the principal targets of Russia's industrial and energy strategy, witnessing a remarkable rise over the years. For instance, while it only accounted for 3% of the country's oil exports in 2005, the Asian continent exceeded more than 30% of the same share in 2021. More recently, the 2022 Ukrainian invasion confirmed this trend even sharply due to the EU countries' massive withdrawal, China and India representing 90% on their own, with India multiplying by more than 50 its exports in only a few years (0,87% in 2018 versus around 40% today).⁴⁰⁵

Furthermore, Russia has been able to maintain its control over Central Asia's geographical areas. In 2005, Russia managed to handle with great balance two severe political crises in two countries - firstly in Kyrgyzstan then in Uzbekistan - affirming its persisting leadership in what it still considers its zone of influence. By Moscow's success in maintaining its relationship with the ruling regimes and proving military occupation, the Kremlin has continuously exerted its power over these former Soviet republics. Foreign policy at the time was looking at Russia's proper interests in the region, and cooperating in order to appease relations, reassure business, and preserve authority in borderland Asia. This policy dually embodied the Realpolitik concept: firstly, Russian methods to achieve its objective resulted frequently in very unethical actions including financial and money gifts to leaders in exchange of a more extended military presence or supporting regimes which were openly violating citizens and human rights in sometimes extreme measures; secondly, Moscow's interests were

⁴⁰⁴ Andrei P. Tsygankov, "U.S. Regime Change Strategy and Great Power Assertiveness," in *Russia's Foreign Policy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 177–209.

⁴⁰⁵ Observatory of Economic Complexity, "Crude Petroleum in Russia Trade", *OECD*, 2023.

satisfied both domestically and on the regional/international scene. With the same Central Asian states, Russia constantly adjusts its policy to reach important military deals, furnishing weapons to most of them, as well as to Iran or Saudi Arabia. Moreover, this Asian interest also allowed V. Putin to monitor internal divisions on the issue, as its “pragmatic cooperation” with the West wasn’t blocking any rapprochement towards Asia, rather the opposite happened. In fact, the Russian President was granted public approval, as a great part of the people were supporting his foreign policy axis. To further illustrate this trend, a 2007 poll even indicated that Russians were slightly more identifying with Asia than with Europe: 45% considered Russia part of the Eurasian civilisation with their interests towards the East for the future, while only 38% were claiming the same thing for Europe and the West.⁴⁰⁶ This didn’t mean that Russia was feeling only positive feelings with Asia - as Europe has always been popular and part of Russia’s culture - but it however proves that the Asian challenges were also perceived and accepted by a large part of Russian population.⁴⁰⁷

4.2. The BRICS States

Aware of these trends, leaders sought to continue this strategic proximity with Asia, developing always more partnerships. In 2008, President Dmitry Medvedev chose for example China for his first official trip to conclude agreements of great potential, opening Russia to the Asia-Pacific region. The Russian President was also supporting the idea of a Eurasian multilateral organisation in order to provide security in the region under Russian and Chinese leadership. In this respect, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was created with China and four other central Asian states, with the scope of fighting terrorism and external threats. In addition, Russia exploited massively the opportunities that the BRICS states represented for the development of the non-Western axis, putting into action its foreign policy’s objectives. Thus, in an attempt to readdress foreign policy’s endeavours towards this kind of countries, V. Putin capitalised on alternative institutions in order to improve Russian influence in world politics. Moreover, the 2014 Ukrainian crisis and its negative consequences have then led to an acceleration of Russia’s distance from the West, which has been doubly felt by the Kremlin with the sanctions imposed by the EU. Moscow’s economic competitiveness became

⁴⁰⁶ Andrei P. Tsygankov, “U.S. Regime Change Strategy and Great Power Assertiveness,” in *Russia’s Foreign Policy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 177–209.

⁴⁰⁷ Ivi, “The World after September 11 and Pragmatic Cooperation,” in *Russia’s Foreign Policy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 135–77.

further weakened, drawing a considerable technological gap with the West and an inefficiency of its finances to recover from these heavy damages. In the same 2014, the Russian Ruble lost nearly 50% of its value due to the combined effects of falling oil prices and Western sanctions.⁴⁰⁸

Russia needed therefore to find support elsewhere. BRICS countries indeed hadn't condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea and its behaviour around eastern regions of Ukraine, nor had they joined Western economic sanctions. Any of these states was satisfied with the idea of politically isolating Russia on the international scene. This mentality persisted for long, remaining valid since the outbreak of the 2022 Ukrainian aggression. The BRICS members' votes at the UN Security Council further reinforced this idea, highlighting the cautious distancing from European and Western countries' views on the conflict. In addition, any of the non-Western states have also been critical of human rights thematic or domestic method of ruling in Russia, largely accepting differences in terms of values. During G20 summits, Russia has usually non-Western countries' support on its diplomatic initiatives. For instance, Moscow's suggestions on the 1999 NATO Yugoslavia's intervention or the more recent Syrian crisis have been two relevant examples, proving both Asian countries' alignment.⁴⁰⁹

High-level summits multiplied between these states to strengthen strategic cooperation on different aspects such as international security, terrorism, non-proliferation and economics. Sharing a less "Western-centric" vision of the world order, where sovereignty and national interests are fundamental, BRICS countries represent today 36% of global GDP and 45% of the world's population. This framework is therefore a great opportunity for Russia to structure its relationship with the so-called "world majority". This concept emerged in Russia's academic and political discourse in 2022 to express a variation of the liberal concept of the "Global South".⁴¹⁰ Since the 2009 Yekaterinburg BRICS first summit, Russia has hosted four times the annual event, reinforcing how it is important for the Kremlin to promote its diplomatic priorities on the international stage. The very last meeting in Kazan, in 2024, proved the significance of the Russian influence within this organisation, as the war in Ukraine has not been a problem

⁴⁰⁸ Andrei P. Tsygankov, "The West, the Non-West, and Russia's 'Civilizational' Turn," in *Russia's Foreign Policy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 233–61.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹⁰ Alexis Cudey, "Le Sommet de Kazan Des BRICS. Un an Après l'Élargissement Historique, Une Vision Du Multilatéralisme plus Précise?" *Observatoire Multilatéralisme & Organisations Internationales*, December 19, 2024.

for any of the other member states to attend the meeting - except Brazilian President Lula prevented by a domestic issue - committed to counterbalance the isolation imposed by the West on Russia. To further capture this momentum, it is worth noting that the Russian press was also mindful of the importance of this summit for the country as a real turning point. For instance, The Moscow Times daily referred to it as “*the biggest foreign policy event ever organised in Russia*”.⁴¹¹

4.3. China and North Korea

After EU sanctions in the post-2014 framework, Russia was forced to find with promptness alternative partnerships in all the many areas affected. To overcome the Western economic pressure and hegemony, Moscow tried therefore to grasp opportunities, shifting further its foreign policy towards Asia, and particularly its largest neighbour. In fact, China has been representing a special place in Moscow’s foreign policy. For their many years in power, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping have drawn specific ties together. They met frequently - more than 42 times since 2012 - developing a strategic cooperation and a close coordination of their foreign policy.⁴¹² By engaging their countries together, the two leaders have reached many dimensions in their partnership, going from commerce to regional security and military areas. Within the BRICS, the Moscow-Beijing axis has great significance. In this regard, it is worth noting that Russia does today almost 40% of its trade with the BRICS, of which 95% is due only to China (\$240 billion in 2023), being Russia’s biggest trading partner, with its exports rising by 46%. In recent years, numerous markets have emerged between the two countries, and trade agreements have proliferated in various sectors. China has become Russia’s biggest supplier of consumer goods, equipment and agri-foodstuffs, surpassing Germany. By 2022, 20% of cars in Russia were made in China, and the latter is also selling its expertise in technology and artificial intelligence. As a last relevant example, the Chinese telecoms giant *Huawei* has been set to develop the 5G in Russia from 2023.⁴¹³

⁴¹¹ The Moscow Times, “Brazilian President Changes Mind about Going to BRICS Summit with Putin,” *The Moscow Times*, October 20, 2024.

⁴¹² France Info, “Xi Jinping Salue La Confiance ‘Croissante’ Entre La Chine et La Russie à l’Issue de Ses Entretiens Avec Vladimir Poutine”, *France Info*, October 18, 2023.

⁴¹³ Igor Delanoë, “BRICS+: Moscou Cherche à Structurer Un Nouvel Ordre Mondial ‘Post-Occidental,’” *The Conversation*, October 23, 2024.

In addition, the two nations share common interests in other areas such as foreign diplomacy and energy, and their alignment on some global political issues further demonstrates this strategic alliance. One of Russia's priorities in Asia is to develop Siberia and its far East regions, and China is in this regard, an essential partner, not only as it helps Russia to the diversification of its economy by massive investments over these areas, but also it brings a great number of workers in Russia's extreme-oriental regions. Indeed, these regions - from Irkutsk to Magadan - are weak with poor local economies, and a population in high decline. In this respect, the contrast between the two populations' densities living in the borderland is astonishing. Indeed, only 5,3 million inhabitants are composing the five Russian East-Ural oblasts whereas the three north-east provinces of China are populated by 80 million citizens. In 2023, more than 300,000 Chinese workers were employed in Russia, even provoking controversy in its Eastern societies, with political protests denouncing the "Chinese colonisation".⁴¹⁴ Already during the 1990s, a form of daily visa for Chinese workers from the region of Manchuria had been implemented in order to easily cross the border on either side. China has therefore been investing heavily in the region's demographics and economy, individually but also through provincial companies supported by the Chinese government. In return, Moscow has been offering its hydrocarbons at very attractive prices to Beijing which did not delay in concluding various cooperations over years, as it was the case in 2014 when Russian giant *Gazprom* signed with the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), the largest contract in the gas industry's history, amounting to \$400 billion over 30 years and exploiting Siberian and Sakhalin pipelines. Ultimately with the war in Ukraine, price negotiations are being a really interesting leverage for Xi Jinping in the isolation context of Russia.⁴¹⁵

Furthermore, Russian global trade with APEC countries - Asian and Pacific Economic Council - has risen steadily for many years, largely due to China. In 2012, the organisation summit stood in Vladivostok, where V. Putin gave a significant speech. He already declared this year, while defending Russia's manoeuvres to engage new economic opportunities in Asia, particularly on transportation: "*Russia's logistical possibilities are enormous because two-thirds of Russian territory is located in Asia, and a third is in Europe. From the economic point of view, it is beneficial to use these routes.*"⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁴ Emilie Aubry, "Le Dessous Des Cartes: Chine- Russie Amis Pour La Vie?", *ARTE*, January 14, 2023.

⁴¹⁵ Emmanuel Véron, "Les Enjeux internationaux: En Russie, Xi Jinping Lorgne Sur La Sibérie", *France Culture*, March 22, 2023.

⁴¹⁶ Andrei P. Tsygankov, "The West, the Non-West, and Russia's 'Civilizational' Turn," in *Russia's Foreign Policy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 233–61.

Regarding these roads, the cooperation has grown steadily between the two countries, developing major projects. In 2015, China proposed its “Silk Road Economic Belt”, which aims to fully integrate Eurasia into a common economic zone. The idea was positively received in Russia, in particular the creation of land and sea routes to connect Central Asia and Europe via Russia and Kazakhstan in order to dynamise these regions. These strategic convergences have provided strong alternatives for Russia to respond powerfully to European sanctions and isolation. Since then, the Kremlin has been therefore motivated to multiply these partnerships and fully reorient its foreign policy towards Asia.

However, Andrei Tsygankov points out the risks that these new balances can pose for Moscow in the future: *“Although Russia’s relations outside the West grew stronger, the Kremlin now had to be careful to not develop an excessive economic and political dependence on China. The Western sanctions presented Russia with opportunities to diversify its economy, but the authorities are yet to make a choice between continued maneuvering and building a developmental state with a strong state role in planning and mobilization of resources.”*⁴¹⁷

China and Russia had proclaimed their “unlimited friendship” on the sidelines of the opening of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. Four days after the end of the competition, Russia invaded Ukraine. Even today, Chinese diplomacy refuses to speak of a “war in Ukraine”, often opting for the word “crisis”, directly referring to the Russian expression of the “special military operation”. During his last State visit in 2024 in Beijing and Herbin, the two Presidents celebrated the 75th anniversary of the diplomatic relations’ establishment between the two countries, stressing the importance of their comprehensive strategic partnership, based on mutual trust and respect for each other’s fundamental interests. However, despite his open support for Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping reminded his counterpart of China’s attachment to “the territorial integrity of all countries”, and therefore its rejection of Russia’s successive annexations of Ukraine. Beijing was also concerned about the nuclear rhetoric employed by the Russian President, probably invoking also its worries about North Korea.⁴¹⁸

This contradiction is justified by China’s need to balance between its interests, as a large part of its manufacturing is exported to Europe. Nonetheless, Russia is aware that China also has to

⁴¹⁷ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *op. cit.*, 233–61.

⁴¹⁸ Harold Thibault and Benoît Vitkine, “L’exercice d’Équilibre de La Chine Entre ‘L’ami’ Russe et La Préservation Des Liens Avec L’Occident”, *Le Monde*, May 17, 2024.

counter the American hegemonism using Moscow as a partner, which even isolated represents for Beijing a major nuclear power, a co-member at the UN Security Council, and above all, a neighbour with whom it shares over 4,000 kilometres of border. As Professor and China's expert Alice Ekman pointed out: "*The existence of a common enemy, and the shared desire to create together a new world order in which this enemy would be weakened, is one of the driving forces behind the Sino-Russian rapprochement.*"⁴¹⁹

Finally, North Korea has also been a state on which Russia has progressively relied as an interesting partner. During the USSR's period, relations were close as Moscow contributed to the creation of the North Korean nation. Apart from a few cool-downs during the Sino-Soviet rift, North Korea has remained fairly loyal to Moscow. In 1961, a friendship treaty was signed, providing for a number of trade and military agreements. However, with the USSR's collapse, North Korea remained isolated for a long time, waiting until the 2000s to reengage in relations. Indeed, Moscow started discussions with Pyongyang around nuclear and security issues, developing their ties. On different occasions, V. Putin took part in discussions between the two Koreas, leading the inter-Korean negotiations for the reunification of the two states and allowing at the same time not to irritate South Korea in order to keep its relations with both countries. In 2011, former North Korean leader King Jong-Il visited Russia during one of his rare travels abroad. Agreeing on the creation of a bilateral commission between the two countries, Vladimir Putin covered other strategic topics such as nuclear energy, wheat exports and even the opening of new pipelines. In 2014, Moscow was authorised for the building of a gas pipeline and a rail link reaching the south of the country. North Korea saw in return its \$10 billion Cold War debt cancelled by Moscow. In the same way, the successor Kim Jong-Un had planned to realise in 2015 his very first trip to Moscow, albeit internal reasons made him finally cancel the visit. In 2023, however, the North Korean leader headed this time for real, a six-day visit to Russia, reinforcing industrial, technological and military cooperation.⁴²⁰

Recently, the bilateral relations gained momentum while the North Korean regime as well as approving Russian aggression in Ukraine, provided military assistance and troops to help Moscow in its battle by the end of 2024. For the first time since the beginning of the conflict, a third country participated officially in the fight, witnessing a little more the internationalisation

⁴¹⁹ Alice Ekman, "Chine-Russie. Le Grand Rapprochement," *Tracts Gallimard*, 2023.

⁴²⁰ Michael Levystone, "Une leçon de Géopolitique : Des Soldats Nord-Coréens En Russie: Pourquoi?", *ARTE*, November 22, 2024.

of the war in Ukraine. Contrary to Western countries, which only focused on delivering weapons and equipment, North Korea participated actively in the war, losing already between 1,000 and 3,000 soldiers out of the 12,000 sent in less than one year.⁴²¹ Even if this military aid was relative - as it represented a ridiculous share of both North Korean army (0,9%) and Russian army deployed on the Ukrainian front (2%) - it took a symbolic pace showing that the Kremlin was not alone and constituted a new element of escalation in the conflict. Moreover, North Korea has significantly supplied Russia with artillery shells, enabling Moscow to maintain sustained pressure on Ukrainian forces since 2024. According to the OSC, Pyongyang has provided between 4 and 6 million rounds, substantially exceeding Russia's estimated annual production of around 2 million. In certain units, North Korean supplies account for up to 70% of their available ammunition.⁴²²

Besides this phenomenon, Iran has also been furnishing arms to Russia since 2022, transferring an important quantity of drones and precision weapons. In January 2025, the two countries concluded a highly strategic defence partnership, even guaranteeing mutual assistance. Thus, with North Korean and Iranian implications, Russia benefits from the implications of two major Asian powers, backed in addition by China, which politically supports the three of them, even if not directly involved in the war. The analyst Thomas Gomart analysed cleverly in this regard: *"When you look at it very broadly, there is an interesting phenomenon of historical inversion in which countries in Asia and the Middle East are becoming players in European security. This one-upmanship shows that Russia intends to bring down EU and perhaps, to distend the transatlantic bond forever."*⁴²³

4.4. Concluding Remarks

With its "Asian challenges", Russia's long-standing choices of multilateral relations had been worth efforts, receiving great economical and security benefits from its eastern side, partially compensating European sanctions since 2014. Among the non-Western countries where the Kremlin has sought to establish stronger ties, Asia has capitalised on many opportunities, by granting partners like China or India which have become both, if not vital,

⁴²¹ Justin McCurry, "More than 1,000 North Korean Military Casualties in Ukraine War, Says South Korea", *The Guardian*, December 23, 2024.

⁴²² Thomas Gomart, "L'Esprit Public: Soldats Nord-Coréens En Russie: Une Internationalisation de La Guerre?", *France Culture*, November 3, 2024.

⁴²³ *Ibidem*.

highly strategic for Russia's interests. Already in 2015 - as he frequently does it - Vladimir Putin invited different world leaders to participate to the Red Square parade in memorial of the Second World War victory. As a symbol of this eastern reorientation, while the entirety of Western nations declined the invitation due to the disagreement with the Kremlin over Ukraine, Xi Jinping and many others Asian officials - ten in total - attended the ceremony, even observing the participation of Chinese and Indian soldiers, as special guests to march with the Russian army.⁴²⁴

These Asian connections, which Russian diplomacy had already started to forge years ago, appear to be more relevant today than ever before. Their growing convergence has been evident for some time now and is increasingly fuelling conspiratorial narratives and violent anti-Western positions in parts of the Global South. Following its national interest since the end of the Cold War, Russia has increasingly thrown itself into the arms of Asia to counter the loss of relations with the West, which had also been impacted by these decisions. According to Russian and Asian views, the advent of a post-Western world is currently at stake, and their leaders probably hope to achieve it together, even if Europe won't be without diplomatic response. One point is clear, France - and its allies - seem far from being granted a "special privilege" from Russia, and if the doubt lingers over the past, the recent situation denies this myth to the utmost. Moreover, the Realpolitik doctrine is confirmed once again in today's geopolitical dynamics. The future of the French and Eurasian relationship remains therefore completely open, although it brings serious concerns in Western democracies.

⁴²⁴ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *op. cit.*, 233–61.

CHAPTER 4/ ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE ON FRANCO-RUSSIAN RELATIONS: THE OUTLOOK OF TWO DIPLOMATS

1. Interview Framework

A semi-structured interview has been conducted with two ex-ambassadors to Paris and Moscow. The same method and questions have been applied to both interviewees. It combines a flexible structure with a clear direction, allowing discussions to adapt to participants' answers. The aim is to understand the Ambassadors' perceptions of the relation between France and Russia under Foreign Policy framework. Their opinions and specific experiences provide an original point of view of the topics analysed in the previous three chapters. This additional lens is particularly useful to explore different details, offering a concrete value to the subject. However, even asking the questions in a neutral way, the interviews cannot completely avoid bias from the two respondents.

The contacts with Mr. Orlov and Mr. de Gliniasty have been established by email through a chain of contacts. No prior links existed with them. The interviews were conducted in Paris on January 6, 2025, and January 22, 2025. They have been informed beforehand of the thesis' purpose of the interview, which ensured them a scientific and non-political framework based on research. The Ambassadors' semi-structured interviews covered all the issues without perfectly respecting the questions' structure, in order to intentionally provide a degree of flexibility in their answers. Both interviews lasted approximately one hour and has been held in French. The transcription and the translation works have been made by the candidate. A short biography of the two interviewees introduces the sections.

2. French Diplomatic Perspective: Interview with Mr. Jean de Glinasty, Ambassador of France to Russia from 2009 to 2013

2.1. Biography

Jean de Glinasty is a French diplomat born in 1948. He graduated from the IEP in Paris, holds a master's degree in law and a bachelor's degree in literature. He is a former student of the Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA), "Léon Blum promotion". He joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1975. He had a long diplomatic career, holding several positions, including Deputy Head of the Centre d'Analyse et de Prévision, Counsellor at the Permanent Representation of France to the European Union, Director of Development and Scientific, Technical and Educational Cooperation, Director of the United Nations and International Organisations, and Director of Africa and the Indian Ocean. He has been the General Consul of France in Jerusalem and Ambassador of France to Senegal, Brazil and Russia from January 2009, when he presented his credentials to Dmitry Medvedev, to October 2013. This last experience made Jean de Glinasty a particularly interesting interlocutor, and relevant to topic of the dissertation. The former Ambassador to Moscow is now a consultant, teacher and research director at the Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques (IRIS), specialised in Russian and Eurasian questions.

2.2.Interview

Thibault de La Palme : **TLP**

Jean de Glinasty : **JG**

TLP - *My first question is quite broad: based on your diplomatic experience and your years spent in Moscow as French ambassador, in what way would you say that relations between France and Russia are privileged? And what are the factors that maintain this special status?*

JG - The question you pose requires me to go back briefly beyond the time frame you've set. When Tsar Peter the Great westernised Russia with great effort, he explicitly created a division of tasks for the modernisation of Russia. And in this division of labor, France had the cultural specialty. To a lesser extent, Italy was in charge of the plastic arts, and Germany was responsible for science after the creation of the Russian Academy of Sciences, which was essentially carried out in close collaboration with the Germans. The Netherlands had shipbuilding, and business was in the hands of England. From the beginning of the 18th century, each country was implicitly assigned a specific function in the development of Russia, decided by the Tsar himself. It's worth recalling the origins of this relationship, which was special in some respects, as it was for other countries in different aspects. The special field touched by France in this context was the arts and culture. Many Russian writers were already immersed in French literature at the time of the birth of Russian literature, such as the great Pushkin. We were at the end of the *Grand Siècle*, and France was the country that excelled both culturally and militarily. In fact, this period was the only time when France was the dominant power in the world, at least in the long term. French art flourished throughout Europe, and the Russian aristocracy - those who studied on their own - learned the French language and studied its literature. Add to this the fact that Catherine II was devoted to French literature and authors, especially novels. You may understand the deep cultural intimacy between Russia and France from the early 18th century onwards. This special bond has endured, and perhaps that's what makes it so special. Even today, for example, France is the leading foreign cinema in Russia - after the American Blog Busters, of course - and even at the time of the war in Ukraine and the breakdown of almost all connections - French cinema was almost the only one to keep going. In this respect, Russia is our leading foreign market for French films. In 2024, after the consequences of the Ukraine war, only Germany was roughly on par with Russia in terms of the foreign film market. What's more, in the current hot/cold war between the West and Russia,

most cultural centers have been closed, but not the French ones. Their links with the embassy are recognized and accepted. So there's a continuum at the cultural level, and if there's a specificity, it's the culture that makes this link so specific. The Russian government, though increasingly inclined towards the Asian pole, accepts and maintains it because it knows that Russian society demands that it be preserved. Unfortunately, current trends show that this cultural link is increasingly fragile, but it still exists, and this is what makes Franco-Russian relations so special. There is no other. If you look at the details of these relations, you'll see that, in every other respect, the relationship with France has virtually always been opposed to Russia. Apart from two very specific moments - one during the First World War before Bolshevism and the other at the end of the Second with the Normandie-Niémen aviation regiment, and then with de Gaulle in 1944 and 1966 - the two nations have never been fully allied and aligned, not least ideologically. Curiously, the culture of ideological opposition between France and Russia goes back to Catherine II: at the time of King Louis XVI's death, she effectively cut all ties with France, with the exception of royalists and French nobles émigrés. At the time, she expelled a large number of French artists, scientists, painters, and writers from Russia very brutally - they had very little time to leave - because France had undermined the principle of absolutism. On the other hand, in support of the *Ancien Régime*, she agreed to accept the great aristocratic families who had emigrated, some of whom remained there. It was in this context that the Duc de Richelieu founded the city of Odessa. Although this French presence had changed, it helped to maintain religious ties with France. Yet Catherine II's political break with France cast a shadow over Franco-Russian relations to this day. Indeed, from the time of Catherine II and the death of King Louis XVI, France no longer accepted Russia's political evolution. Right or left, France became liberal. And French liberals, who were the very essence of France's political evolution, rejected and condemned Russia's authoritarian, illiberal regime. This ideological opposition to Russia has been a constant in French history since the end of the 18th century: whether on the right or the left, an authoritarian, autocratic, and brutal Russia was despised as backward. You'll find this in left-wing authors, of course, but also in right-wing authors like the Marquis de Custine, for example. An outspoken European liberal, who wrote a devastating pamphlet on Russia - not entirely plausible, by the way - that gives an idea of the political perception of the time. Therefore, political opposition is also a constant in Franco-Russian relations, right up to the present day and Vladimir Putin. There's a special moment in the Franco-Russian relationship, the only time when the majority of politicians who detested the authoritarian regime switched sides after the Bolshevik revolution. Between 1917 and 1990, for almost 81 years in France, the liberal part of the political class

continued to despise the new repressive Russian regime, accentuated by the Cold War, with extremely negative arguments about the evolution of Russian society. But another part of the French political class returned to the traditions of the Revolution, relying in particular on Bolshevik propaganda. Celebrating the experiences of 1789 and 1793 with the Terror, revolutionary France, which had been rejected by Catherine II, was erected by the Communists as the ancestor of the Russian Revolution. During these years, Russia deployed incredible soft power towards France. From the start of the Russian Revolution to the Helsinki Conference in 1975, the power of Russian influence and the hybrid war waged by the Third International was colossal. The great majority of French intellectuals were Marxist-Leninist, as well as most of the artists, such as Eluard, Aragon, and Prévert. Most journalists had Marxist training, as did all our philosophy teachers. And many were members of the French Communist Party. This lasted until the Helsinki conference, which marked a shift in the ideological balance between the West and the East, to the disadvantage of Russia.

TLP - *What kind of support did Russian soft power have in France?*

JG -It relied on the CGT and the Communist Party, which represented between 20% and 25% of the electorate, and was the party of the “martyrs of the Second World War”. Of course, the Ribbentrop-Molotov (German-Soviet) Pact of August 1939 and Russia’s support for Germany were silenced. It was the propaganda of the *Parti des fusillés*, the party of the war’s victors, intellectuals, and artists. So there was a real cleavage in French society between supporters of Russia and supporters of the more liberal, democratic, and social-democratic Western world. French diplomacy did, however, have a special moment when General de Gaulle managed to achieve a certain balance in relations with Russia, transcending these divisions in the name of France’s geopolitical interests. This language spoke to the people of Russia, who, after the First World War, saw this moment as a new détente between the two countries. Speaking of the First World War, I would like to note that the Battle of the Marne was won thanks to the Russians, who forced the Germans to fight four armies on the front from west to east. Without this aid, decided unilaterally by the Tsar in the face of opposition from the Russian General Staff, we’d have had no chance of winning. Russia suffered a heavy price, with several defeats, such as at Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes. It was therefore a privileged moment in relations between 1890 and 1917, illustrated in the end by the struggle of French diplomacy to save this alliance by maintaining Bolshevik Russia against Germany. This battle was finally lost when Russia signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and negotiated a separate peace. Later on, the second key

moment was De Gaulle's synthesis between the ideology that separated us from Russia and the strategic interests that united us. From 1944 onwards, de Gaulle had taken the first steps in this direction, even though Stalin had been less than receptive. De Gaulle's strategy in Moscow also aimed to warn Stalin by leveraging the French Communist Party, which was gaining a great deal of influence after taking power following the Liberation. Despite the slights he received during this trip, his determination to ally would lead him to secure from Soviet Russia and the Cominform a kind of neutrality, if not benevolent, at least passive. Thus, Moscow committed to maintaining a certain neutrality regarding de Gaulle's seizure of power in occupied France against both the Americans and the French Communist Party. Finally, de Gaulle made his presence felt in 1966, when France withdrew from NATO's military command. The Soviets appreciated Paris's independence from the United States and understood this as a rapprochement. But apart from these two privileged moments, as I've just explained, we can see a contradiction where everything contrasts between the two countries, particularly ideology. Apart from cultural issues, which remain an exception, no area can be considered fully privileged. In fact, this cultural link is gradually being broken, with the possible exception of cinema, which remains outdated compared with new modes of distribution.

TLP - *What about the economic sector you have not mentioned?*

JG -You're right. Economically speaking, from the very start of the emergence of the modern economy in Russia, France has had catastrophic relations with the country, particularly as regards exports. Historically, it was the Germans and Italians who always exported to Russia, while France exported almost nothing, rarely exceeding 5% of trade flows. The Germans, on the other hand, were at 10% and even higher before the start of the Ukrainian crisis. In 2010, I think they were even up to 14%. The Italians are also far ahead of us, but to a lesser extent. On the other hand, when it comes to investment, France has always been much more supportive of the Russian economy. The problem is that we lost everything in the end. These investments were in all areas: in finance with the Russian loan, in the Russian Public Service, in the automotive sector, and in perfumes because luxury has always been part of Russian culture. In fact, at the time of the Ukrainian crisis, France was on a par with the Germans in terms of investment in Russia, and Germany is an economic power almost twice as powerful as France. But just like with the Bolshevik Revolution, which saw French investments vanished, the war in Ukraine led to our position as the top investor in Russia go up in smoke, above all with the measures that France adopted. These decisions were separate from European sanctions, and we

were not necessarily obliged to take them. Mr. Bruno Le Maire would go down in history as an Economy Minister known for having sold off French economic assets in Russia. If I take the case of *Renault* alone, the company had to write off 2.3 billion in debts, and Russia was its largest market...

TLP - *You have made an interesting distinction between the two areas, economic and cultural. France's strong cultural imprint in Russia should imply a truly privileged relationship, but is there reciprocity? In recent years, how has this paradox been reflected in French foreign policy? Do our internal divisions in French politics play a role in this shift in foreign policy towards Russia?*

JG -It's true that a semblance of Gaullist tradition, with a genuine geopolitical interest in Russia, has permeated our great leaders. The Pompidou, Giscard, and Mitterrand periods confirm this. Like de Gaulle, these three Presidents were men steeped in history and therefore had a realistic vision of Russia. Jacques Chirac shared this same vision, but during his presidency, the construction of Europe had reoriented France's geopolitical game in another direction, and with the Treaty of Nice, France had no real room for maneuver vis-à-vis Russia. Nicolas Sarkozy has taken a very pragmatic approach to Russia, arriving at a privileged moment in Moscow's relationship with the rest of the Western world. It was the moment of the "reset", when the Russians mistakenly believed they could keep their zone of influence in the former USSR with the complicity, or let's say indulgence, of the Western world. Yanukovych was President of Ukraine at the time. There was then a consensus in that country; the Russian language was guaranteed as well as neutrality, by constitutional law. Another concrete example is the Russian naval base at Sevastopol, whose lease ran until 2042! For Westerners, Ukraine was not a problem, indeed, Russia and Ukraine had been developing their trade until the Maidan events of 2014. With François Hollande, things changed, and Russia diplomatically "fell back" into the ideological bias. Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, he clearly saw Russia as an authoritarian and imperialist regime. He did, however, create the Normandy Format after the Minsk agreements, but contrary to what he said - shamefully without keeping his reserve - the Minsk agreements were only intended to deceive the Russians to allow Ukraine a break and rearm. I believe this to be untrue and insulting to French diplomacy, even though it had put in a great deal of effort, and it discredits it for a long time in the eyes of the Russian authorities.

TLP - *Can you return to the signing of Minsk II in 2015 under the aegis of France and the Normandy format? What about this Franco-German initiative? How do you think they were perceived by Russia and France?*

JG - On the French side, I must say that it was quite a brilliant initiative, born from a shared Franco-German analysis. But it must be acknowledged that the core concern came from Germany, as the European economic model we were developing in partnership with Russia was advantageous for them. Nord Stream 1 had been inaugurated, and the construction of the second pipeline was underway. It was a rather idyllic arrangement that had ensured Germany's prosperity since 1982. This first gas agreement between Germany, France, and Russia allowed for the purchase of cheap energy. This model was the economic jackpot, and the astute Germans quickly understood that if there were a war in Ukraine, this jackpot would collapse. France shared this analysis because it benefited, too, to a lesser extent, from the advantages of this arrangement. President Hollande, therefore, took advantage of the 70th anniversary of the D-Day landings in Normandy, on June 6, 2014, to bring together France, Germany, and Russia. French diplomacy also wanted to bring in the United States at the start, but this was unsuccessful, as President Obama derailed the initiative. As with the League of Nations, when the Americans withdrew in 1920, the rejection of the Normandy Format has become, in my view, a tragedy. With them, the initiative would have had greater legitimacy, but it was Obama who didn't want it. From the moment the Americans were absent from the Normandy Format, the first Minsk agreements, signed in the Belarusian capital in September 2014, were never going to carry the expected weight. In fact, these first agreements were not respected for very long, and France and Germany quickly lost their influence. During the second Minsk agreement, in February 2015, France and Germany made every effort, using their weight at the European level. Putin needed some convincing, but he ultimately accepted the proposed terms, as the agreements were fairly favorable to Russia, even though they preserved Ukraine's territorial integrity, apart from Crimea. It was therefore a very successful diplomatic move, and the administrations rightly took pride in it. However, it ultimately failed because, the day after the agreements were to be implemented, the Ukrainians said: "*A special status for the Donbas? Never!*" They rejected it, and with them, a large part of Ukrainian public opinion, particularly Galicia, refused the parliamentary ratification of the Minsk agreements. Following this, Ukrainian President Poroshenko maneuvered for a very long time - just as his successor Zelenskyy is doing - because the truth is, there was no other viable solution for lasting peace than the Minsk agreements, but they still had to be implemented. On the Russian side, it wasn't

much better: at the time, Putin was under pressure from the right, by people close to Prigogine's circle, and the Russian President has always been extremely cautious with these nationalist escalations. It would be a mistake to think he was the most extreme, as Russia has deep internal political divisions, with part of the elite being much more hardline. I remember there was an entire powerful political faction that criticized him for the Minsk agreements, claiming that he had given up the chance to conquer all of Ukraine when the Ukrainian army was weak. Putin's perceived weakness was therefore challenged by some, and it's the very same theme that Prigogine later used against him, and it ultimately cost his life! The Minsk agreements were, therefore, very well thought out and intelligent, and it's certainly not the agreements themselves that led to their failure, but rather many external factors. At the time, the Russians had the advantage on the ground - and they increasingly did - but neither France nor Germany had the political will or power to ensure the implementation of these agreements. That was the biggest mistake! On the Russian side, it was also complicated because the authorities did not allow OSCE observers to access all areas. A part of Russian society did not appreciate the Minsk agreements and opposed them. It is really unfortunate that the Americans did not participate in the process because, together, I believe the coalition could have compelled both Moscow and Kiev to implement the agreements. And today, Ukraine would not be in its current situation. It should also be said that beyond Minsk, at the time of the Maidan events, the Ukrainian parties - both opposition and government - had managed to reach an agreement by signing a deal on the night of February 21 to 22, 2014. The key players were President Yanukovich, the Ukrainian centrists Poroshenko and Klitschko, as well as the far-right nationalists. The main European mediators supervised the negotiations, including the Polish Sikorski and the German and French foreign ministers - Steinmeier and Fabius. Everyone was there, and the parties agreed to resolve the crisis, organize new elections, and consider the possibility of constitutional changes. The Europeans had thus partially succeeded in their endeavor. However, after this meeting, it was Maidan Square that firmly rejected the agreement and had it annulled under extremely mysterious circumstances. When Klitschko arrived during the night of February 22 to 23 to proclaim victory after the signing, expecting to be acclaimed, he was met by a crowd that shouted violent insults at him. People were yelling, "Bastard, traitor, you are selling out the interests of the Ukrainian people, whose bodies are still warm," as a massacre had taken place just days before. One man even tore the official document from his hands, and the group behind this plunged Ukraine into 40 years of misery! Russia had formally approved and initialed these agreements, notably through Putin's special representative, who was also present on site. He called the Kremlin to say that the latter accepted the agreements, even though some

skeptics claimed that, deep down, Putin wouldn't go along with it. I don't know the truth, and I wasn't there, but the fact is that the Russians had accepted and endorsed these agreements. At the same time, it's possible to believe that a "private" operation was being prepared, and that the Russian President didn't truly believe in this arrangement, preparing instead to take forceful measures. In any case, I'll reiterate that, although both the Normandy Format and the Minsk Protocol were very well thought out, they painfully highlighted the weakness of France and Germany, which were ultimately unable to secure - especially from Ukraine, but also from Russia - the implementation and respect of these agreements, which could have opened a chapter of lasting peace in eastern Ukraine.

TLP - *Could you comment on another recent initiative that left a strong impression on European minds: that of Emmanuel Macron? From 2017 to 2019, he tried to rebuild good relations with Russia, and France received a lot of criticism for it. How do you analyse this period?*

JG - Listen, if we try to understand and analyse France's foreign policy initiatives in terms of diplomacy, here's what I would say. First and foremost, French policy was guided by geopolitical consistency: in 2019, Emmanuel Macron hoped not only to make a major impact by bringing back the Normandy Format summit to Paris, thereby becoming a key factor for peace. A genuine French diplomatic effort had thus begun in Versailles, continued at Brégançon and in Russia, with its climax intended to be the Paris summit on December 2, 2019, which ultimately failed. To organize this summit, Putin warned Emmanuel Macron at Brégançon. I specifically remember one phrase among others: *"I'm willing to go, but there must be results."* Putin's special envoy then began negotiating an agreement that was supposed to implement the Minsk agreements, with the special status accepted according to the famous Steinmeier formula. Everything was prepared in advance, teams and collaborators met beforehand, and at the starting signal, everything was meant to happen. Old quarrels over the precedence of Russian military and political measures were even set aside, signaling a level of trust to begin the summit. However, that is not what happened, although what truly transpired at that moment has been carefully concealed-and this remains one of the sources of tension between Putin and Macron. As Zelensky was about to leave Kiev, he was under extreme pressure from the Ukrainian nationalist right upon learning that the agreement was about to be signed by their President. Zelensky notably left Kiev airport to a chorus of insults - and reportedly even spitting - as if he were betraying his nation. When he arrived in Paris, although he was supposed to sign

since he had previously given his consent, he backed out and claimed he had been deceived. His team stripped the Paris agreement of its substance, naturally leaving the Russians dissatisfied. At that moment, neither Merkel nor Macron dared to blame Kiev. It's rarely mentioned, and no media today references it, but in reality, the primary responsibility for the failure of the Minsk agreements - which France and Germany tried to save at the Paris summit in 2019 - lies with Ukraine.

TLP - *Are you saying that the responsibility lies in the internal political conflicts within Ukraine?*

JG -Largely so! Some have also questioned the interference of foreign powers, notably the role that the United States or the United Kingdom might have played in this dynamic. Nothing is certain, but the refusal of the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson to continue the Istanbul process and to convince Ukraine to withdraw from it in April 2022 raises questions. History will tell, but in any case, Boris Johnson never denied it, and his stance was very hawkish. In any case, after the 2019 failure, Macron tried to maintain the line and, in a very commendable way, worked to prevent the invasion of Ukraine. He could not have believed - and honestly, neither did I - that the Russians would invade, making such a grave mistake. The French president fought until the very end, as we saw notably during that surreal final meeting at the Kremlin, where everyone was seated at opposite ends of a huge table. But by then, Putin had already made his decision. Meanwhile, France took positions that reflected a certain solidarity with NATO, especially regarding the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. I remember the famous episode in 2019 when Putin proposed to revive the INF agreement, which Trump had actually withdrawn from. On the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, Putin stated that there was no safety net in Europe and that the common defense system needed to be reconsidered. He called for the resumption of negotiations to create a new treaty alliance, which the Americans rejected. This proposal was dismissed with a certain hauteur by NATO and France. Somewhat embarrassed, President Macron wrote a letter to Putin explaining the reasons for his refusal, while suggesting that this did not close off the possibility of future alliances. By sending this letter, France actually put itself at odds with the other NATO members. This is a position France has often found itself in when trying to accommodate Russia. As a result, Emmanuel Macron faced significant criticism from NATO allies who did not understand the message he was trying to convey to the Russians. Following this episode, the French president's credibility was seriously undermined: on one hand, for being unable to uphold the agreements that had been pre-negotiated before the Paris summit, and on the other, for not fully aligning

with NATO's stance. All of this played a role in the crisis, including the negative response to the Russian ultimatum to extend the proposed treaty, which was sent to the United States and NATO. This Russian proposal called for the neutralization of Ukraine and the refusal to establish NATO bases in the countries of the former Soviet bloc. In fact, the NATO founding act contains a very cautious clause stating that NATO does not see the need to deploy weapons bases in the former Warsaw Pact countries. The Russians, as usual, demanded a lot: the resumption of the INF treaty and traditional negotiations, OSCE-format referendums, the withdrawal of NATO bases, and the neutralization of Ukraine concerning the alliance. On December 7, 2021, Washington responded by highlighting the imbalance in Russia's list of demands. At the beginning of January, the U.S. State Department's reply was clear: it refused to start negotiations on the INF treaty and declared that Ukraine was "free to choose its alliances." Implicitly, this statement meant that the United States was ready to welcome Ukraine. To form an alliance, both parties must agree, and at this stage of negotiations, there could have been some room for backtracking or a less categorical official response from NATO. According to its statutes, the organization is legally supposed to carefully review the applications of countries wishing to join and their actual consequences, which requires time. The Russian Foreign Ministry's response was also unequivocal at the end of January–early February 2021. Their three points - set out in the treaty - were interconnected, and if any one of them was not respected, the Kremlin reserved the right to "proceed with politico-military measures," which essentially means war. I admit I did not fully grasp this aspect, focusing only on the word "politically." I never imagined this at all, like many within French diplomacy who had not taken the military aspect into account. The invasion seemed outrageous to all political circles. Then, I would say that French diplomacy managed to maintain its consistency. Emmanuel Macron immediately warned his allies that Russia must not be "humiliated," as at that moment, Russia was truly at risk of losing the war, especially after the Ukrainian counteroffensive in August-September 2022, when the Russian front completely collapsed. It's important to know that Moscow was releasing prisoners from their jails to send them to fight at the front because hardly anyone else wanted to enlist. The U.S. State Department and Paris feared that the Russians might use tactical nuclear weapons to defend Crimea. President Macron's goal was therefore also to prevent this horrific escalation. When the war became stalemated and Ukraine started to face serious difficulties, France clearly affirmed its support for Kiev. Again, there was a risk of escalation because, after all the efforts the West had made to prevent Ukraine from losing, its defeat would have been absolutely catastrophic. At that time, there was also a risk of escalation, although now the front has stabilized. In short, I believe that

the French diplomatic line has been consistent in its focus on avoiding escalation. The final step came in September 2024 with the President's statement hinting that France might deploy troops or at least was considering doing so. Again, I think there is mainly a deterrent aspect to this kind of statement, even though it was widely misunderstood. Over the past two years, it has become clear that the Ukrainians, even with limited numbers, have fought quite well, resisting bravely. Knowing that the collapse of the Ukrainian front-so eagerly anticipated by the Russians-would not occur, France has benefited from being the leader of its European supporters.

TLP - *On this last topic, especially regarding NATO and the French President's reversal, how do you view the strategy of French diplomacy that led to a break with its usual stance, which Paris had defended for several years alongside Berlin? How do you see this shift in France's foreign policy in relation to the coherence of de-escalation that you mentioned?*

JG -We need to go back a bit to fully understand, particularly to the beginning of Nicolas Sarkozy's term. First, I want to say that this President was a great pragmatist. He was not an ideologue, but rather a Westernist, even if today the term "Atlanticist" no longer carries the same meaning. At the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008, he fought through an entire night of negotiations, alongside Angela Merkel, to prevent Ukraine from obtaining Membership and automatic entry into NATO. Unfortunately, he was forced to concede by accepting the formula stating that the members confirmed Ukraine and Georgia would become members in the future. Immediately afterward, the war in Georgia broke out. France has always opposed the idea of admitting these countries into NATO because it knew this was Russia's red line - leading today to Crimea. In 2023, Macron thus betrayed this position by completely changing course, as he began negotiations for the entry of these same countries into NATO. Even though the context has obviously changed, I don't see any justification for such a shift in policy. This is likely also due to his good relations with President Zelensky, but perhaps also to counter Germany, which remained much more measured by positioning itself as Ukraine's strongest ally. During this period, France was often in rivalry with Germany to have "better relations" with Kiev, and that certainly didn't help. The only geopolitical justification could be the guarantees to be provided in the event of a peace agreement, but for now, France and Europe are still far from that. However, at the time this policy shift really became clear (in 2023), the context was not at all favorable for a peace agreement. It is therefore complex to interpret, unless one considers the long term, as today de-escalation might be more conceivable. In any case, I find that, at the

time, it was rather incomprehensible, and it thus seems to be more of an inconsistency. In April 2022, during the Istanbul talks, the crisis was supposed to be resolved through direct discussions with Vladimir Putin, particularly through international guarantees, including NATO. The recent idea of having international contingents as part of the peace agreement has also appeased the dangerous and irrational nature of sending troops, which has limited over time the impact of Emmanuel Macron's statement.

TLP - *With the recent developments you mentioned, if we look at it from the perspective of Russian foreign policy, would you say that France holds the position of European leader in the dialogue with Russia?*

JG - The past does not work in our favor, as I mentioned earlier. The relationship was more privileged with Germany, particularly due to the considerable economic interests between the two countries. This affects diplomatic dialogue, and the pivot of Russia's economic presence in Europe - Germany - naturally carries more weight than it did. There were a lot of Russian investments in Germany, unlike in France. I was responsible for economic relations during my five years in Moscow. There were very few Russian investments in France, apart from wine, a few luxury clinics for wealthy oligarchs, and a project in the railway sector. Otherwise, there was nothing - it was pitiful compared to the projects developed in Germany. I remember that one of our biggest projects was the construction of a fertilizer plant in the Dunkirk area, but there was an outcry from the public because it was polluting, so the investment never materialized. It's true that France is no longer a land for industry, as you know, but this economic difference reflects the privilege - or lack thereof - granted to a bilateral relationship. And I haven't even mentioned the energy issues, which also don't work in our favor to be considered a "leader." Of course, France has always been associated with dialogue, an important element given its position within the European economy, its independent foreign policy, and its status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. But it's undeniable that the pivot of rapprochement with Russia was much more Germany than France.

TLP - *After the various French initiatives we've discussed, could you tell me about any attempts at dialogue or rapprochement initiated by the Russian side - whether they specifically concerned France, or were aimed at dialogue with Europe more broadly?*

JG -Of course, and they are important for understanding how the relationship and Russian sentiment developed. First, there was the "grand Russian project," endorsed by François

Mitterrand in 1990, which consisted of a proposal for a European Confederation. This idea has been a fairly consistent theme in Moscow. It was notably taken up again by Dmitry Medvedev in 2008, with a treaty proposed to European institutions and NATO, or - as I've mentioned before - during the ultimatum of December 2021. The principle of Russian diplomacy was to have a peace treaty that would establish an indivisible security framework for the European continent, a sort of protective umbrella vis-à-vis NATO. All these treaty initiatives were buried, and although the idea was taken somewhat seriously in 2010, the Russians understood well that the project could never materialize. I remember the response from the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, the British diplomat Catherine Ashton, which rather sums up the situation in Europe at the time. She told the Russian delegation: *"Your idea isn't bad, but first, you need to start by resolving the Transnistrian issue in Moldova!"* I forgot to mention - just to follow up on the German question we discussed earlier - that during his term, Dmitry Medvedev doubled down on bilateral efforts with Germany to advance the issue of European security. The two countries created a mechanism, known as the "Meseberg mechanism," named after a small suburb near Berlin where the former Russian president had met with Merkel. People have forgotten this meeting, and most are unaware of the existence of this mechanism because it was stillborn. It's actually very difficult to find any written records about this project; I haven't kept any documents, and that's a shame. After their 2010 meeting focused on security, Merkel and Medvedev wanted to set up a system that was intended to be European-wide. It was meant to establish automatic consultations in case of crises in Europe. And believe me, if it had worked, there wouldn't have been the slightest shadow of a crisis in Ukraine. The initiative was entirely German-Russian, which adds to the argument of European leadership. Once again, it was Catherine Ashton who firmly opposed the project, backed by a number of other states as well. At the time, Brexit hadn't yet happened, and a number of states, together with the Americans, believed that a conflict-resolution mechanism in Europe had no place outside of NATO. Angela Merkel had accepted Medvedev's proposal, although she had her reservations. In any case, this project was clearly a Russian initiative, aimed at creating a legal order in Europe that could bypass NATO by establishing a specific dialogue between Russia and European countries. These attempts have been a constant feature of Russian diplomacy, which, since Gorbachev, has oriented all its initiatives in this same direction. The French have been among the most open to this approach, as François Mitterrand had adopted the idea of a "Common European Home" proposed by Gorbachev to create a Confederation in Europe. At the time, not all Eastern European countries were opposed to the idea as they have been more recently. For instance, the Czech leader Vaclav Havel also revived the idea. In reality, even

before 2023 and its major turning point, France had already, at times, aligned itself with NATO's common response, by opposing the various treaty proposals - whether under Putin or earlier under Medvedev. In the Russian mindset, the West has repeatedly rejected their initiatives to create an alternative order of peace in Europe, different from that of NATO. The constant in Russian diplomacy has been the desire to eliminate NATO, which they have regarded as a threat from the beginning. On the European side, countries have always been wary of Russian proposals, which resulted, over many years, in a series of back-and-forths without concrete outcomes.

TLP - *Finally, how would you characterize France's status in its relationship with Russia?*

JG - I'll be a bit caricatural, but it's necessary to be so. France once had an autonomous foreign policy and had to take Russia into account. But as soon as it aligned itself with the Atlantic- or Westernist - camp, that is, the order led by the democracies of Western Europe and the United States, France had to fit into that group and effectively lost its independent foreign policy. Of course, it participates in the foreign policy of a group of countries, but it no longer has its own independence and then forgets its French particularities. When France is in that system, it can no longer have a distinct policy toward Russia. Back when France had its own foreign policy, it also had a specific Russia policy. This argument may sound simplistic, but it quite concretely explains the status given to Russia - and vice versa - because when we lack a Russia policy, Moscow treats us like any other country.

TLP - *I'd like to follow up on the observation you made. How did you experience this contrasted relationship while France's foreign policy was becoming less and less autonomous? How did you feel about it as a diplomat during your five years in Moscow from 2009 to 2013?*

JG - I must say, on a personal note, I have always been very fortunate with my appointments because, every time I was sent somewhere to work, it was an ideal moment for that country. I was in Jerusalem during the Oslo Peace process, in Brazil for the 150th anniversary of Brazilian independence, in Senegal with Abdou Diouf and the Francophonie, and finally in Russia during the Medvedev era. At that time, he was a liberal leader who wanted to push for Russia's opening up; he signed the "Reset" with Obama and took part in reviving the START treaty. There was really a sense of renewal, with exponential growth in Western investments in Russia, significant exchanges, and the France-Russia Year in 2010. Looking back, I would say this period was based on a kind of misunderstanding: Europeans, myself included, believed that Russia was

prioritizing rapprochement with the Western world, which was already benefiting them greatly, and would therefore gradually accept some democratization and a slow evolution toward a more liberal political regime. On the other hand, the Russians thought the West would grant them a sort of “right of oversight” over the former Soviet socialist republics - mainly Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Belarus. Paradoxically, it was during a strong period of economic development that a misunderstanding took root, leading to many subsequent misinterpretations and conflicts. It was at this time that the war in Georgia began, where President Sarkozy played a crucial role in calming tensions and finding a solution that, contrary to what is often said, did not jeopardize the future. Looking at the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it doesn’t mean these “Republics” are part of Russian territory or the Russian constitutional system. Being independent, they could decide whether or not to reunify with Georgia, which allowed for much greater flexibility. I heard very senior Russian officials in Moscow say: *“We will never be grateful enough to Nicolas Sarkozy because in 2012 he prevented us from taking Georgia, and if we had done so, we would have been at odds with the Georgian people for a century!”* Indeed, today in Georgia, half the population remains convinced that they want to maintain good relations with Russia, despite the invasion of Ukraine. This is often misinterpreted by the press, which frequently repeats that 80% of Georgians want to move closer to Europe. This is true, but journalists often forget to mention that within this 80%, at least half support European integration only on the condition that it does not antagonize Russia, with whom they share an 800km border. This is a fundamental point.

TLP -*Why do you think France and Europe failed to negotiate the same outcome during the Donbass crisis?*

JG -The situations aren’t the same, and the contexts differ as well, but perhaps Nicolas Sarkozy’s presence could have changed things. I insist that public opinion has been very unfair to him. He had many flaws, but when it came to action, he knew how to use his instinct and energy intelligently. It’s thanks to that that he resolved the Georgia issue, which gave a remarkable four-year delay. People often say Sarkozy spoke on behalf of Europe, but that’s false - he alone decided when and how. Of course, he warned European allies by calling beforehand, but he had neither their approval nor any formal mandate from Europe, which, as usual, was quite divided on the matter. It would be more accurate to say that he imposed his solution on European thinking. It was only upon his return from Tbilisi that joint meetings took place. The partners no longer had a choice, but he managed to secure this agreement, thereby

preserving the appearance of the European Union at that moment. We came close to a more harmonious relationship with Moscow and a relative liberalization of Russia - albeit very relative - but the country was gradually moving in that direction. Moreover, and most importantly, it would have undeniably prevented Russia from falling into China's arms, which it has done since then with rapidly increasing intensity. Today, a reversal in this Sino-Russian cooperation seems unlikely. This was, in fact, a genuine Russian policy pursued within the framework of a more autonomous French foreign policy - and not everyone appreciated that. After this episode, France no longer distinguished itself from the Western camp, and its Russian policy virtually ceased to exist. I'll give you a somewhat sad example from the following years. In 2021, there were already initial incidents in the Black Sea, and we came quite close to escalation. A meeting between Biden and Putin quickly took place in early June to de-escalate the conflict in the Black Sea and try to resolve the Ukrainian issue. Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron reacted and explained to their European colleagues that it was not appropriate for the fate of Europe to be decided at a bilateral Russia - United States summit. At the European Council on June 30, the French and Germans put this issue on the agenda after Russia expressed its willingness to discuss Ukraine's future with the Europeans. I must acknowledge President Macron's efforts to push for this request and to obtain a draft agreement with the Russians, even though Angela Merkel was less inclined to support it. Just as the agreement was nearly finalised, the European Commissioner in charge of foreign affairs, Kaja Kallas, stood up and said: *"I am on the border, and my country, Estonia, has been invaded three times and seen its people deported. Therefore, it is not Europe's place to discuss these matters. I trust the United States, not the other European countries. Let the Americans act."* For me, this was a fundamental mistake that demonstrates this lack of understanding and the autonomy problem we discussed. The foreign policy of Europe was entrusted to the former Prime Minister of a country with 1.7 million inhabitants, who holds as much influence in the European Commission as France or Germany, and whose convictions are deeply rooted in Atlanticism - a stance that is no longer really relevant today. We can clearly see now that being Atlanticist no longer makes sense. Donald Trump will negotiate with Vladimir Putin without us, and it will be difficult for the French because we won't be at the negotiation table. If relations between the United States and Russia normalize, Trump will make the Europeans pay for it, notably by taking what remains of our position in Moscow. We are in a period where France must influence European foreign policy, although I'm not very optimistic. What is certain is the necessity to invest significant effort and resources to guarantee our security, to rearm, modernize our army, and so forth. All of this is inevitable.

TLP - *Precisely in this context, how do you see the future of our foreign policy and, more broadly, the future of relations between France and Russia?*

JG - People who claim that Russia wants to conquer Europe are ridiculous and don't pay much attention to history - it's absurd. I readily admit that Ukraine is an emotional and utterly irrational priority for Russia, which has led them to make all these mistakes, but beyond that, no. In diplomacy, nothing should ever be excluded, especially if Europe grows weaker, but I don't believe that will happen. That said, we must not forget that the French perspective is limited. If I were Estonian, I would certainly worry much more about this threat, because if the Americans were to abandon NATO, I wouldn't give much for Estonia's territorial integrity. Putin might then think that, given Russia's current position, it could reclaim the Baltic coast. So indeed, in these cases - at the Baltic borders as well as in Georgia - there is a serious risk. Outside of this aspect, it is very difficult to predict Russia's relations with France and Europe because the Russian urban elites are much more Westernized than one might think, and nowadays they are actually more Americanized than Francized, which was not the case before. You cannot govern a country against its elites, and most of these elites want to do business and want to work with the United States and Europe because they know these markets are important. For Russians, France has become a somewhat old-fashioned but pleasant, almost tender fragrance, but it no longer appears as a major and firm player in international relations. I have obviously not returned to Russia since the invasion, so I have fewer direct contacts with diplomats, but I know that the Chinese presence is absolutely heavy and permanent. The Chinese have made a colossal breakthrough thanks to this rift. However, I still have the feeling - and polls also show this - that a majority of Russians want to end the war, and within this majority, many urban elites from the West want to reconnect with Western Europe. This will take a lot of time because the positions have been taken by the Chinese, and they will not want to give anything up. Culturally as well, there is currently a phenomenal orientalised Russian culture. In Moscow, this was already felt in the cuisine, with dozens of Chinese restaurants. Also, the Americans are going to lift the Jackson-Vanik amendment on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. This amendment was put in place at the time of the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan to impose sanctions on countries of the Soviet bloc. Many factors mean that the rapprochement will be very slow. It will take a great deal of time before this wall crumbles, and as history moves increasingly fast, if there is a war over Taiwan, or worsening problems in Africa and the Middle East, we will be in two opposing camps. Those who long wished within

French and European diplomacy - which was not my position - to build a wall between Russia and the rest of Western Europe have won, we must say it as it is.

TLP - *Thank you very much, Ambassador. If you had to share one last essential insight from your five years spent in Russia, what would it be?*

JG -As I mentioned, my time in Moscow was quite privileged. To give you an idea, I left just the day before the catastrophe began with the Vilnius Summit in November 2013. That was when the setback occurred with José Manuel Barroso, who then refused to negotiate a special status for Ukraine with Russia. He said somewhat arrogantly that Ukraine was “free to choose” and that if it ultimately chose Europe, “too bad for Russia”. Once again, an agreement was almost signed, and the Russians had even shown their willingness to settle matters by putting three billion dollars on the table, along with a one-third reduction in the gas price. The Ukrainian President Yanukovich did not sign this agreement, and that was the beginning of Maidan and everything that followed. During the day, the demonstrations were peaceful, involving intellectuals and liberal democrats from the city of Kiev. But from around 7 p.m., those people would return to their homes, leaving only extremist nationalist right-wing groups behind, including very hardened semi-combatants from the Azov region. These groups notably fueled Putin’s narrative of “denazification.” For him, it was a direct way to condemn them while asserting his supposed right to oversee Ukraine’s evolution. The problem lies in the second part of that statement. It’s important to understand that this so-called right to oversee is no longer acceptable. Russia is already paying the price, and Putin will surely pay as well. One way or another, Russian public opinion will not forgive him for breaking with Ukraine. There is now indisputably a united Ukrainian nation, firmly rooted in hostility toward Russia for a very long time. Everything happened very quickly, and it’s astonishing to think that on the eve of my departure and the Vilnius summit, everything seemed fine. No one imagined such a rapid deterioration. Even though there were already some dark clouds with the Libyan and Syrian crises, it was different, they were geographically far from Europe and wouldn’t have been deal-breakers. I left at the end of a blessed time, and perhaps I lived through the last period when we could still believe that Russia’s integration with the West was possible.

TLP -*Thank you again, Mr. Ambassador!*

JG -Thank you, I hope this interview will be helpful for your work!

3. Russian Diplomatic Perspective: Interview with Mr. Alexander Orlov, Ambassador of Russia to France from 2008 to 2017

3.1. Biography

Alexander Konstantinovich Orlov is a Russian diplomat born in 1948. He graduated from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO). After completing his studies, he joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1971. He has a long diplomatic career, holding several positions, and sharing great bonds with France, which allowed him to become over the years, perfectly fluent in French. His father being already working in Paris, A. Orlov spent a part of his childhood in Paris. From 1993 to 1998, he was minister-counsellor at the Embassy of the Russian Federation to France. Back in Moscow in 1998, he holds the direction of the first European department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 2001 then, he was sent in Strasbourg where he became the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the Council of Europe for 6 years. In 2007, he returned two years to Moscow where he headed the department of relations with the federal subjects of the Russian Federation. On 14 October 2008, Alexandre Orlov was finally appointed Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to France, also accredited to the Principality of Monaco. Leaving the Embassy in 2017, after more than 9 years in office, he had one of the longest term as Russian ambassador in Paris. This last experience made Alexander Orlov, a particularly interesting interlocutor, and relevant to topic of the dissertation. Even if the former Ambassador has retired, he is still living in France, assuming since 2019, the role of General Executive Secretary of the “Trianon Dialogue”, instituted by Vladimir Putin and Emmanuel Macron to strengthen links between the French and Russian civil society.

3.2.Interview

Thibault de La Palme : **TLP**

Alexandre Orlov : **AO**

TLP – *My first question is quite broad: based on your diplomatic experience and your years spent in Paris as Russian ambassador, in what way would you say that relations between France and Russia are privileged? And what are the factors that maintain this special status?*

AO – I think that the relationship between Russia and France is very special. If we look at history, our two countries are linked by privileged relations, and the word “privileged” has always been used when discussing Franco-Russian relations. Indeed, these historic ties are already part of a legend, that is, the marriage between Henry 1st and Anne of Kiev in 1051 in Reims. Henry 1st married Anne of Kiev from Russia, but their marriage didn't last too long, as there was a huge age difference, but even if it didn't, it left many consequences since the story is over 1,000 years old. Another departure point was Peter the Great's visit to France in 1717. He was the emperor who opened Russia up to the outside world, particularly the Western world, since in his youth he had tutors from Western countries. There was a certain Monsieur Lefort, a Genevan from Switzerland, who had a great influence on Peter the Great and opened his eyes to Europe. The emperor made two major journeys outside Russia that lasted several years. He left Russia for two or three years to travel in Europe. He even wanted to come to France before 1717, but Louis XIV refused to receive him. When Louis XIV died, the heir Louis XV was only seven years old when he welcomed Peter the Great, and the same emperor established diplomatic relations with France. He even thought about marrying off his daughter Elisabeth, who was the same age as Louis XV. Meaning a missed opportunity for a dynastic marriage between our two countries. It was when Elisabeth became Empress of Russia that French culture was introduced into Russia, such as the French language at court. The history between the two countries had happened before Catherine the Great; it is often said that it began with her, but it was Elisabeth who started it, even if Catherine the Great did a lot afterwards. Therefore, I think that when we talk about the special ties between Russia and France, they are especially cultural bonds based on our languages. Since Elisabeth, the French language has been practically the 2nd language spoken in Russia. All the nobility spoke French more or less well. People don't think about the language, but it's very important, it's even fundamental to understanding each other. Today, I say that if we want to build and rebuild special relations

between Russia and France, Russians and French must learn each other's language. It's essential that the French learn Russian, and the Russians learn French, otherwise, we can't build a relationship of trust. If we speak only English between us, for example, we don't fully understand the other person's mentality, which is fundamental in a relationship. We need to speak the other person's language.

TLP – *You are saying that Russian foreign policy gives a great deal of importance to culture? Has this special relationship endured over the centuries?*

AO – I believe it has endured, of course, but unfortunately, less and less, as we see all around that English is pushing other languages aside. Even in France, more and more English is spoken in the institutions and the administration. This is truly regrettable, and I believe that the first effort we must make is to return to our mother tongues. Thanks to their knowledge of the French language, Russian diplomats, for example, were perfectly familiar with French literature; indeed, throughout the 19th century, the Golden Age, French culture was very well known in Russia. Many Russian writers came to France during this century, including Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Chekhov. There were real cultural exchanges that helped build a solid foundation. Today, I think this basis is unfortunately threatened, not least by cultural changes. The fact that fewer and fewer people read is one of them. We must not lose, once and for all, the most precious thing that founded this special relationship.

TLP – *Since the start of your career, have you felt this special relationship, particularly during your 10 years as an Ambassador in Paris?*

AO – Absolutely, I felt it. Even today, I have many French friends, and I can see that among the French as well as the Russians, there's still this special attachment and affinity for both countries. The French love Russia: they love Russian culture, and it attracts them. At the first Trianon Dialogue Forum in 2018, we carried out a survey in France and Russia to see how the two peoples saw each other. The results were clear on both sides. To the question "Do you want to come back to Russia?" for example, 80% of French people answered "yes", which means that French people who have been to Russia at least once want to go back. This figure speaks volumes. This deep-rooted attachment, linked to our shared history, is indisputable. If you look at our history, it has had its ups and downs, but the times we are living through today are undoubtedly among the worst. You'd have to go back to the Crimean War of 1853-1856 to find

a similar atmosphere, accompanied by a strong hatred of Russia that was noticeable in France. That war ended, and the end of the 19th century brought us together again with the Franco-Russian alliance. Our relations were marked by this alliance, which played an extremely important role. As you know, Nicholas II, our last emperor, paid his first visit to France in 1896. He was given a triumphant welcome. We'd never seen anything like it - it was a veritable Russo-mania! Hence, there were terrible times and good times. Russia helped France enormously during the First World War. When the Germans launched their offensive on Paris in August 1914, the French asked Russia to start an offensive on the eastern front. Although not yet ready to launch such an offensive, the Russian army halted the German advance on Paris, costing considerable losses. Marshal Foch used to say that if France had not been wiped off the world map, it was primarily to Russia that the French owed their survival. After that, relations were based on mutual trust and assistance.

TLP – *Would you say that when you were ambassador in Paris, France still had this “privileged status” within the Russian Foreign Ministry?*

AO – France has always been respected as a friendly state. In your research, you analyse relations between France and Russia, especially since the 5th Republic, for a little less than 70 years. I can say that since that time, France has often been the first travel destination for a new Russian head of state. That just showed what a special relationship it was. I'm sure there's a lot of regret among former Russian leaders about what's going on right now. Unfortunately, in Russia in general, there's a sort of feeling of betrayal, which is very bad because we've never had such cordial relations with other countries. Take Great Britain, for example. Great Britain has always been our great rival and was our number one enemy in Europe, along with the Germans. Our relations were different. There may have been several wars, but France was always seen as a friendly state. This explains why today, if the British and Germans do something against Russia, we think it's normal, but when France joins these countries to help Ukraine in the war against Russia, it's much more shocking for a Russian who sees it as a betrayal, with all the consequences that entail. My words are strong, but I want you to understand the bitterness and disappointment that exists in Russia today about France. You know, I tend to say that relations between states are like those between a couple: there are difficult moments, but I believe that love and friendship must triumph at some point, despite everything.

TLP – *You mentioned Germany, but don't the Germans share such a privileged relationship with the Russians as France does with Russia? In recent years, hasn't Germany - rather than France - been the leader in Russia-Europe relations? What's your take on this?*

AO – No, I wouldn't say that. You must distinguish between the two. For us, Germany has always been our leading economic partner because, in industrial terms, we have to acknowledge that Germany is a great European power, more than France. This is true in economic terms, but it's far more complex in political terms, where France has always been privileged. Germany has never had its own policy; after the Second World War, its leaders chose to follow the Americans, while de Gaulle decided to develop a special, autonomous relationship with Russia. This has never been forgotten and has contributed to France's greatness in Russia. France has always been keen to strike a balance. President Macron himself has used the word "balance". The problem is that he often says true things, but little action follows. Thanks to his policy of independence from the Americans, De Gaulle had found the balance that made France a major player, the biggest political player in Europe. Even if things have become more complicated recently, politically speaking, there has never been any doubt that France was our number one partner.

TLP – *You mentioned General de Gaulle and his desire to integrate Russia into the equilibrium. What do you think of his famous phrase "l'Europe, de l'Atlantique à l'Oural" (Europe, from the Atlantic to the Urals), and what meaning do you give to it in a global reading of foreign policy?*

AO – Global balances of peace have always been a foreign policy goal for France, which is why de Gaulle intelligently stressed the importance of Russia. The German expression Realpolitik would fit in well with the policy he pursued. Unfortunately, today's leaders have forgotten this essential point: we need to build security in Europe with Russia, not against it. This is the serious mistake that European leaders are continuing to make today by trying to build a new security system in Europe without Russia. It won't work. For the record, I've always wondered why de Gaulle said "Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals" when Russia goes from Brest to Vladivostok, much further. And then, after a while, I thought maybe I'd found the answer to my question. On several occasions, I had the opportunity to visit General de Gaulle's office on rue de Solferino, where he came every week after he left office until his return in 1958. On the wall in front of his table, there was a large map of Europe, stretching as

far as the Urals, but not beyond. I said to myself that, having looked at this map every day, he had integrated, perhaps despite himself, a Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals. This is obviously a personal explanation. But I think he was right and that this phrase illustrates the policy of *détente* we were talking about earlier. De Gaulle began by calling it *détente, entente, coopération*. Today, we're back where we started, and I hope that after this phase of hatred and mutual incomprehension, we'll return to this triptych: first *détente*, then peaceful coexistence, and finally, cooperation. Indeed, De Gaulle's words are more relevant than ever today.

TLP – *What were the reasons behind this phrase? Was this desire for “détente, entente, coopération” driven by foreign policy interests, or did it go beyond these by seeking to integrate a “friendly” nation with which the relationship has always been perceived as privileged?*

AO – Absolutely, as I've already mentioned, there's no opposition to that, being allies can also contribute to one's own greatness. Take the absurd expression “pro-Russian”, for example. You couldn't say that General De Gaulle was “pro-Russian”; on the contrary, he was always “pro-French”. When he pursued his foreign policy, it was above all France's interests that he had in mind, but he understood that these interests depended precisely on striking a balance between the United States and Russia, with a Europe that could aspire to have its own say in international affairs. He succeeded in doing this for a time, but since then, France has unfortunately lost this role by aligning itself with only one side and losing its independence.

TLP – *You confirm that France was following its own interests, not hesitating to align itself with the United States if necessary, even if it meant sacrificing its relationship with Russia?*

AO – It's more complicated than that. A country's foreign policy is necessarily dictated by its national interests. Today, with European integration and the increasing delegations in Brussels, French leaders no longer know where their national interests lie. European interests have replaced national interests, and France has lost the independence of its foreign policy. As a result, it finds itself doubly aligned with Brussels within the European Union and with the United States within NATO. It no longer has the means or, above all, the political will to conduct an independent, autonomous international policy. Even if it would like to maintain ties with Russia, it is compelled not to do so. The risk is that it will no longer exercise any influence as a country because if you don't have your own say, you lose your influence.

TLP – *Some defend the view that France's national interests are best served by this European and NATO force, even though it has 'turned its back' on Russia. What is your opinion on this?*

AO – There is no contradiction. Through its political culture and its history, France is also a nation close to the United States and Europe. However, it must not forget that it is also close to Russia. General de Gaulle clearly demonstrated that we can be close to the Americans and the Russians without losing our national identity. This is, for me, the point that France must regain; it is not easy, but in politics, nothing is impossible. Sometimes, all you need is the will to do it. Indeed, we have recently seen this process begin in several European countries. I'm thinking of the governments of Hungary and Slovakia, which are trying to find their own national interests within European interests.

TLP – *Resuming this first part, would you say that the Franco-Russian relationship is neither the story of a perfect and very privileged relationship nor a mere tool for foreign policy purposes?*

AO – Relations between Russia and France have always been passionate and never indifferent. Today, the situation is incomparable, we are in a catastrophic phase. In my entire career, this is the worst period I've ever known in these relations. There are many reasons for this, and I've already mentioned the importance of languages. Unfortunately, I found that no one in the French ruling class knew either our language or our country. Very few had even been to Russia. I wonder how a country that is a permanent member of the Security Council claims to play a universal role, could ignore Russia as a key player. It's incredible! I think that's what we need to do: open up to others, don't sulk, and don't spread mistrust and hatred, especially against a country with which we've always had a special relationship....

TLP – *I now have a question on domestic policy. You said that a country's foreign policy is based on political will. This political will also depend on a country's internal political divisions. How do you think these divisions in Russia have influenced the relationship with France and, more specifically, the management of its foreign policy towards France?*

AO – You're right, and it's an old story. In Russia, there have always been isolationist Russophiles and others who are more open to the outside world. Indeed, I can say that this openness was strong under Gorbachev, whom I knew and served. I accompanied him to

Strasbourg when he gave his famous speech on the “Common European Home”. His concept was clear: since we live together on the same continent, it is vital for all of us to build a common home. General de Gaulle and President François Mitterrand were both concerned with this concept. Mitterrand was a very complex man and had a very special and personal relationship with Gorbachev, which was based precisely on the acceptance of this idea of a common European home. Mitterrand had even put forward the idea of a European Confederation that would have included Russia. It was not the European Union, but it was a Confederation, larger and fully inclusive of all. This idea was quickly scuttled by the Americans when it was launched. They were naturally against it, because their permanent desire was to separate Europe from Russia. Russia and Europe together make a stronger political and economic force than the United States, which is why the Americans have always wanted to separate us. Today, they have succeeded thanks to the crisis and then the war over Ukraine. I don’t know how long this separation will last, but I’m sure of one thing: the only winners in this conflict are the Americans, while the Europeans are the biggest losers. In Russia today, even though more isolationist Russophiles are in power, the desire for understanding with Europe has never waned. Our President, for example, is a Russian patriot, that’s for sure, but he’s well-balanced, so I wouldn’t say he’s an isolationist. Indeed, he is not a Francophile either, but he has always been very open to dialogue. Since his election, he has always wanted to build a special relationship with Europe, not just with France but with Europe in general. After almost 20 years of trying to get closer to Europe, Putin found that it was Europe that did not want Russia. I understand that, after all his efforts, his pragmatism is telling him to change his foreign policy. I think we can well understand the disappointment of a statesman who, since he came to power, has never stopped trying to get closer to Europeans. It was Europe that did not want Russia, and as I said, because Europe is controlled by the Americans.

TLP – *Did this shift in foreign policy under Vladimir Putin - and more generally in Russia - begin in 2022, or do you think it emerged much earlier?*

AO – No, it is older than our military intervention in Ukraine. You know that in 2007, in his speech at the Munich Security Conference, Vladimir Putin had already begun to warn about NATO enlargement. You have to re-read that speech to understand that the Russians have always feared that NATO would move closer to our borders. Our leaders already knew that it would end badly if the Western countries didn't understand. You know, I recently had this confidence concerning the interview of V. Putin and J. Chirac in 2008 to deal precisely with

the theme of NATO expansion, with the issues of the accession of Ukraine and Georgia. France was also against this idea, for all the reasons we mentioned earlier, but unfortunately, the final communiqué still stated that Ukraine “had a vocation to one day join NATO”. In a more personal conversation between the two heads of state, J. Chirac asked V. Putin what would happen if Ukraine did join NATO. Putin replied: “*There will no longer be a Ukraine*”. I think that speaks volumes. I mean, you can see that there has been no change of line for Russia. Since 2008, our President has been consistent. For us, Ukraine is Russia; it has always been part of Russia. Kiev is where Russia was born. It is therefore important to understand that it is unthinkable for us to see Americans setting up bases and troops in this country. I mean, unthinkable! Unfortunately, many people do not understand this idea. To return to V. Putin, he is neither Francophile nor Francophobe, he has always been pragmatic and open to Europe.

TLP – *When you say that V. Putin has been making efforts for 20 years to consider Europe. What about France in this approach? In this relationship with Europe, did France have a status similar to the other nations or special consideration for him?*

AO – No, of course, it was a privileged country. Its excellent relations with J. Chirac prove it. At the end of last year, during his annual press conference, a journalist asked him: “*Can you name a few politicians who are still alive or already dead and with whom you could have tea?*” He mentioned Chirac, describing him as a charismatic, warm man with encyclopaedic knowledge. I can tell you that this was not without reason. His special relationship with J. Chirac, and therefore necessarily with France, was based on trust. Our former and great Minister of Foreign Affairs, André Gromyko, who served for more than 25 years and whom I knew a little, was very Francophone. He loved France very much, and he was not alone in that. This love for France resided among many people in Russia. In my entire career, I can assure you that I have never known a single Francophobic Russian leader. In 2012, when François Hollande was elected, in line with the relationship that Russia has always had with France, it was Mr V. Putin who took the initiative to meet the new French President. I attended their first conversation at the Elysée as Ambassador, and our President was keen to collaborate. Unfortunately, François Hollande knew little about Russia and international politics. It was Minister Laurent Fabius who was at the heart of the conversation on these subjects. This surprised us. For me, a President must be well acquainted with foreign policy, especially for a great country that has a vocation to play a role in the world. Vladimir Putin’s initiative proves, in any case, that the desire for dialogue has always been present on our side.

TLP – *This allows me to move on to the next two questions. I wanted to focus on two significant diplomatic and foreign policy events. It was under the mandate of François Hollande that the Minsk II agreements were concluded in February 2015; you were in office at the time. Under the aegis of France, with the support of Germany, the Normandy format proposal was set up to find a solution with all parties. How did the Russian government perceive this initiative?*

AO – It was indeed a very important moment in our relations. Vladimir Putin was already pleased to be invited to the commemoration of the Normandy landings on 6 June 2014. He did not hesitate to come. I accompanied him and the Ukrainian President P. Poroshenko was also there. The two already knew each other, but under the aegis of this invitation from President Hollande, they resumed the conversation, and the Normandy Format was born. It was a success at the beginning because I saw for myself that the two Presidents were talking very amicably, they were smiling, it had been a really good contact. Then there were the events in Donbass, and the first Minsk agreements were signed without France and Germany. To give more strength and guarantee to these commitments signed by the separatists and the Kiev government, France and Germany came to Minsk. I know that the negotiations lasted several hours into the night. People who were there told me that Angela Merkel was conducting the negotiations with V. Putin more intensively. F. Hollande was more in the background. For us, it remained very important that two major European countries, France and Germany, were confronted with the commitments made by the separatists and the Kiev government. The initiative was, in any case, greatly appreciated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. When I was an ambassador, I attended all the meetings that followed the agreements. I can't say that I participated directly because the stakes were such that the Presidents dealt directly with each other. My role as ambassador was to facilitate and organise these contacts. But having witnessed the whole process, I can tell you once again that the Minsk Agreements and the Normandy Format were viewed very positively on the Russian side, right up until the last minute, even when the process was relaunched in 2019. Russia also played the game until the last minute. It really wanted these agreements to be applied, and it was the least that people should be able to speak their own language. You know that from 2014 until 2022, the bombings in Donetsk did not stop, causing many civilian deaths. Few people talk about it, but we are talking about 15,000 people. Unfortunately, I am not telling you how things continued after that, where, during those seven years, nothing was done to put these commitments into practice.

TLP – *On which side(s) has nothing been done?*

AO – On the Ukrainian and Russian sides, but mainly on the Ukrainian side, since the separatists could do nothing. The main aim was for the Donbass region, which is mainly inhabited by Russian-speaking Russians, to have a certain cultural and economic autonomy so that people could normally practise and speak their mother tongue. You know that V. Zelensky spoke Russian before he was President of Ukraine; everyone spoke Russian, and that confirms what I was telling you earlier about the Russian past of this country. Little concrete progress has been made since the Minsk agreements. Then, in 2022, Angela Merkel and François Hollande admitted, shortly after the war, that these agreements were a strategy to allow Ukrainians to “buy time to rearm”. This was said openly, which is incredible, as Russia really wanted these agreements to be applied after all this diplomatic work. When V. Putin hears this, how can he be expected to have any confidence in his European partners? It came as a shock to him and to our diplomacy. We never imagined that this political cynicism could go this far. It also helps to explain why trust is at zero today. Everything will start again from trust, it must be recreated, starting with stopping this campaign of hatred against Russia in France and in Europe in general.

TLP – *Isn't this “hate” campaign, as you call it, also fuelled by Russia's tendency not to respect international law? Do you think these difficulties are an obstacle to trust with France and Europe?*

AO – This is a very important issue, but I believe that double standards are often applied. Today, another country is clearly not respecting international law: what Israel is doing in Gaza is absolutely scandalous. Yet what are France and the European countries doing? The Palestinian people are being subjected to genocide, and nobody is saying anything. On the other hand, the Russians are being unequivocally punished. I believe that the “violation of international law” is an instrument that is used however we want, and is very subjective. What's more, in France, there is often a single way of thinking. I assure you that it is not far from what I experienced in the Soviet Union during the communist era of Pravda. Today in France, to be present on the domestic scene, you have to repeat the same thing over and over again, expressing your hatred of Russia. Fortunately, there are still a lot of French people and people in positions of authority that I know who say other things, but they are not given the opportunity to express themselves. They are the so-called dissidents. I'm telling you, it's really the spitting image of the Soviet Union: some people said what was expected of them, and then there were the others who were

not considered. I see a similarity with today's France, which nevertheless claims to be a democracy.

TLP - *The second diplomatic initiative I wanted to come back to is that of Emmanuel Macron from 2017 onwards. As soon as he arrived, he sought to establish a “demanding dialogue” with Moscow by getting closer to V. Putin, which had also drawn criticism in Europe. How was this seen by Russian diplomacy and the ruling class in general?*

AO – This question is of particular interest to me, as I played a very active role in organising their first meeting in 2017. I also mention it in my memoirs. I had noticed that it was the 300th anniversary of Peter the Great's visit to France. As I believe that history should always be revered, and that it is a great help in regaining confidence, the exhibition organised in Versailles was a perfect opportunity. I therefore suggested that the exhibition be inaugurated by the two Presidents. At the time, E. Macron had not yet been elected, but his political advisor had told me that he thought the idea was a very good one. These discussions had been held in secret, as relations were not good at the end of François Hollande's term of office. Indeed, in 2016, Vladimir Putin was to be received in Paris to inaugurate our cultural and spiritual centre with the Basilique de l'Alma, but journalists had revealed France's hesitation, particularly because of the situation in Syria. When our president heard this, he decided to wait for another moment. Relations between François Hollande and Vladimir Putin were completely severed, and this put France and Russia in a really delicate phase. That's why my proposal to organise Vladimir Putin's visit to France to inaugurate this exhibition in 2017 was received with great attention at my Ministry. They asked me if it was the right time, so I thought that if they were hesitating, I would suggest it myself to the French side. I made it clear to the Quai d'Orsay that Moscow would accept this invitation. Once elected, V. Putin called the President to congratulate him on his election, and E. Macron replied by thanking him and inviting him to the inauguration of the exhibition. For these reasons, this meeting came as a surprise to everyone, both Russians and French. V. Putin was the first foreign president to be received by E. Macron, who had just been elected president. It was a good starting point, a new beginning after years of quarrels. Every year, there is a conference for ambassadors at the Quai d'Orsay, and in 2018, Macron gave a good speech with a strong emphasis on relations with Russia. He had a balanced and independent approach; one might have thought that de Gaulle was speaking. Unfortunately, the actions did not follow. You are going to ask me why? Because I think that this is the tragedy of President Macron: he doesn't have the means to realise his policies. Sometimes he says very

true things, but he can't realise them because he's not in charge at home. It's the Americans and Brussels who are calling the shots. The final decision is made by Mrs Von der Leyen and not E. Macron. That's the tragedy of France.

TLP - *There wasn't much time between this period of warming and 2022. With the invasion of Ukraine, we went from a phased reconstruction, as illustrated by the initiative you launched, to an unprecedented rupture. How do you explain this change?*

AO – You see, right up until the last moment, France held the presidency of the European Union, and on 7 February 2022, E. Macron went to Moscow to see V. Putin to try to save the Minsk agreements. I think he really wanted to save them. He had a very long conversation with the Ukrainian authorities after going to Kiev to convince V. Zelensky to enforce his agreements. But, once again, the big American brothers said no. They once again ruined this initiative of French diplomacy. That's why I say that E. Macron does not have the means to carry out his policy. That is the main problem, and the Russian government knows it. Our ministry says, *"In any case, France doesn't decide anything nowadays; it's the Americans or the European Commission in Brussels."* Even if some people say that France wants Europe and its decisions, I think it's more complicated than that and that the French don't really want civil servants deciding for people they have directly elected. This was clearly illustrated recently with the signing of the Mercosur agreements. Although E. Macron had said that France was openly against it, this did not prevent Ms Von der Leyen from making the decision. This shows the extent to which France has lost its influence in Europe and the repercussions in our bilateral relations.

TLP - *We mentioned two initiatives on the French side. On the contrary, can you give me examples of Russian initiatives to get closer to France through a diplomatic process?*

AO – When I was ambassador, France was already largely integrated into all the European mechanisms, whether the OSCE or others. When Russia felt increasingly threatened by Ukraine's integration into NATO, it launched a draft treaty on security in Europe in 2021. We wanted to talk about the issues that upset us in order to resolve them by expressing what we considered to be a threat to our security. Russia proposed to start these negotiations and, unfortunately, received a negative response from both the Americans and the Europeans. France had to fall in line, despite the goodwill of some. That's why there was only one thing left for V. Putin: to use force. If no one wants to negotiate with us or work on a new security treaty in

Europe, what should we do? Too bad, and everyone loses. And in those cases, given history, it is unfortunate that France did not support this initiative. Another Russian initiative before this was the Helsinki Process in 1975. The final act of this conference was the signing of a real charter for a new Europe of détente, which included Russia. It can be said that it was the consecration of détente. The Russians and the French had prepared this action, and the Russian and French diplomats began to negotiate this process as early as 1972, and after their impetus, the other countries joined them. This was a joint initiative; it perhaps illustrates even more the special relationship between our two countries. There was also the post-Soviet era after the new Charter of Paris. When Boris Yeltsin came to Paris in 1997, I was already Minister Counsellor at the Embassy. I have a long history with Paris. I also attended the signing of this act of rapprochement with NATO. This act was a strong one, and even if the impetus came from France, Russia very quickly joined the Paris initiative. The Helsinki Process and the 1997 Act are two concrete examples of Franco-Russian initiatives, the inspiration of which should be revived today to prepare a new European charter providing all the guarantees of political and diplomatic security. In my opinion, France and Russia must play this cardinal role, as they have always been able to do.

TLP - *You mentioned Syria just now. Do you acknowledge that France, in line with its primary interests, does not support your initiative and that there is still disagreement on this case?*

AO – I would say that the Syrian case is a bit of an exception. I can say that Bashar al-Assad was more of a friend of France than of Russia. He was received several times in Paris with great ceremony, whereas in Russia less. Russia rescued Bashar al-Assad with the specific aim of opposing this wave of regime changes launched by the Americans during the famous Arab Spring. Syria did not escape this influence; Washington wanted to replace their leader. The Russians, therefore, analysed this realistically. V. Putin put it very well, saying that if this was allowed to happen, the next victim would be Russia or one of its neighbours. It was in this context that the Russians came to the aid of Bashar al-Assad for no other reason. In addition, at the same time, there were the very deadly Islamist attacks in France on Charlie Hebdo and the Bataclan. François Hollande went to see Vladimir Putin in Russia in 2015 to launch a common front against Islamic terrorism; Putin welcomed the idea. In this context, France sent the Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier to the Syrian coast. Putin ordered the Russians present in Syria to consider the French as allies. For the first time since the Second World War, moreover, the word “ally” was used about France and Russia. It was a strong word used by V. Putin precisely

concerning the conflict in Syria, and the alliance was there. A few months passed, and the Americans once again put pressure on F. Hollande, and France gave in. As our President once said at a press conference: “*We noticed that one day the Charles de Gaulle quietly left without telling us anything...*”. It is regrettable that this alliance did not last long, as it did not involve other European countries. You know, for Vladimir Putin and Russian diplomacy in general, the essential quality in a statesman is reliability: if someone says something, they must keep their word, if they don’t, they no longer exist for him. Unfortunately, this was the problem for François Hollande and, later, for Emmanuel Macron.

TLP – *We mentioned François Hollande and Emmanuel Macron. Even if it was before you took up your post in Paris, what do you think of Nicolas Sarkozy and the French initiative on the Georgian crisis of 2008?*

AO – President Sarkozy’s involvement in the Georgian crisis was very well received in Russia. At that time, I was preparing to leave for Paris as Ambassador. I was going around the administration to prepare myself. When I spoke with Dmitry Medvedev’s diplomatic adviser - he was also a friend of mine - he told me that he greatly appreciated France’s gesture and its role in resolving the conflict very quickly. It must be said that Nicolas Sarkozy dared to go to Moscow when the other European heads of state were against it. He took the initiative, and he did very well. It should serve as an example to show that when France wants to, it can still play an important role inside the country and in the world by having an independent influence. It was a really positive initiative for us, even more so than the Minsk agreements, for example, because the results were quick and direct. I also very much regretted that N. Sarkozy was no longer in power at the time of Minsk. We could have put more pressure on Ukraine as it had done and understood in Georgia. Ukraine is a composite state; I did not say artificial, but composite, and it has never really existed as a nation-state. If Ukraine wanted to exist, it would have had to become a confederal or federal state in order to give all the peoples who live there, the Russians, Hungarians, Poles, and Romanians, a certain degree of cultural autonomy. This would have solved all the problems, but the Ukrainians in power did not do it and never wanted to do it.

TLP - *When you list all these people, don’t you forget that there is also a Ukrainian population?*

AO – Of course, I don’t deny it, there is obviously a Ukrainian people, but when V. Putin says that Ukrainians and Russians are the same people, he is absolutely right. It’s like in France, you

have people who live in the south and others in the north of France. They are not the same; they speak with different accents, yet they have the same identity. Originally, they were Slavic tribes who lived in what is now Russia. These tribes were partly in Ukraine and partly in the rest of Russia. They formed a single people who lived together but spoke different dialects. All Russians, if they don't have family, have friends in Ukraine. This is obviously the case for me, and I see that there is no difference between me and my Ukrainian friends. During the Soviet Union era, several leaders came from Ukraine, including Brezhnev and Khrushchev. You are no doubt familiar with the story of Khrushchev giving away the Crimea. He did that without ever thinking about what we have experienced today. During the commemoration of the tercentenary of the reunification of Ukraine and Russia in 1954, to mark this anniversary, Khrushchev decided to reattach Crimea to the Republic of Ukraine, but at the time, as in almost all eras, this Republic of Ukraine was attached to Russia, at the time, the USSR. The border was purely administrative, and the people were still the same...

TLP – *We recalled the times when France aligned its foreign policy with the United States, de facto thwarting its “special relationship” with Russia. In the end, didn’t Russia do the same thing on a different occasion when it turned to Asia? I am obviously referring to the period preceding the very particular context post-2022.*

AO – With my long experience, I can tell you that Russia has never tried to do anything against the interests of France. It has never been in our interest to antagonise Europe. Our interests with China and other Central Asian countries stem from bilateral relations, with the aim of partnerships. We are not seeking to create an alliance against anyone. I believe that the BRICS that we know today are a new edition of the non-aligned movement of the 1950s and 60s, when countries came together to align themselves with neither the Soviet Union nor the United States. The BRICS are a group of completely different countries, and the basis of this rapprochement is precisely the rejection of Western domination. I see it as somewhat inspired by this phenomenon of non-alignment. All the countries that, over time, have been disappointed by the Western bloc have come together to try to defend their own interests, above all economic interests. I would remind you that this alliance is not a military one, but simply the desire to create a parallel world in economic terms, avoiding the sanctions that penalise us. It is, therefore, not against the interests of France but simply the embryo of the multipolar world in which we want each country to have its place and its rank without wanting to dominate the other.

TLP – *The break with France after 2022 also resulted in a sudden change in E. Macron's foreign policy, putting an end to the dialogue and the line that France had traditionally defended, particularly on Ukraine's accession to NATO. Moreover, for the first time on this issue, Paris and Berlin no longer speak the same language. How do you interpret this?*

AO – This change has had catastrophic consequences for our relations because Vladimir Putin has lost all confidence in Emmanuel Macron. He trusted him and had seen his efforts to build bridges, but this dashed his hopes. The Russians see this as a betrayal, which is how Vladimir Putin himself describes this change in French policy, wondering why. I have tried to find the answer and have arrived at an explanation. It is personal and perhaps not exact, but it seemed possible to me in the light of history. France has a Gallic spirit; it often wants to play the leading role, whether it is good or bad, and it always wants to be on the front line. When E. Macron saw that the tide had turned, that France's European allies were all aligning themselves with American foreign policy, he must have realised that he had the choice between being isolated in Europe with his own policy towards Russia or joining an anti-Russian bloc and playing an important role in it. To do this and become the leader of this bloc in Europe, you have to “shout loudly”, and that requires significant action, which is what he did with NATO. If you want my opinion, I find it a bit light, not very intelligent, since in the long term, France finally joined the losing side, losing a lot in the process. It was a bad choice because anyone knows that, militarily, Ukraine will inevitably lose this war.

TLP – *Wouldn't this choice illustrate the demystification of the “special relationship” with Russia that you described earlier?*

AO – We could see it that way, it's true. Let's just say that I believe this special relationship with Russia really ended with J. Chirac. I say this because he and his predecessors worked to maintain these special ties. I knew and spent time with J. Chirac, F. Mitterrand, and V. Giscard d'Estaing, a little less with G. Pompidou and de Gaulle, but I can say that they were presidents with great personality and independence. They had a deep knowledge of things, not only of geography but also of Russian history and culture. J. Chirac even spoke a little of our language, which he had learned in his youth, and he even quoted Russian authors. In any case, they were presidents who understood the importance of Russia to France. This then deteriorated, but of the last three, N. Sarkozy was the best. He had the virtue of being a very pragmatic man, unlike F. Hollande or E. Macron, who proved to have an overly ideological vision of the world. I saw

this personally during the period of the Soviet Union. That's why I emphasized the importance of returning to the language of the other, to the culture, to understand each other completely.

TLP – *If we had surveyed all Russian diplomats in 2022, asking them to name the European country to which they feel closest and with which Russia has the best relationship, what do you think they would have answered?*

AO – I think that the majority would probably have said France. Today, it is more complicated because all the European countries have joined the same camp, and there is no longer any difference between them. Even for Germany. It is also the sentimental side and the heart that would have spoken, and for that, France is always a step ahead of the other European countries. The Russians also love Italy, but Italy has never played an important role in European politics. We have always had very good economic cooperation. If we take economic affairs, for example, cooperation has always been slower with France because it has a more disciplined approach. Before doing anything in the economic sphere, companies ask the supreme power whether it can be done or not, especially in business with Russia. To launch a major Franco-Russian project, it was always the President of France who gave the blessing. I find that rather ridiculous, by the way. It would never happen in Italy. Would you see an Agnelli asking an Italian prime minister for permission to sign a contract with the Russians? No, neither the Italians, nor the Germans, nor the Dutch operate like that, and that is why economic relations with these three countries have always been more fluid.

TLP – *I come back to the perceived betrayal by Russia when France changed its policy. Do you also understand the situation where Ukrainians are calling for help, and many Eastern European countries, including the Visegrad Group, are reiterating their fear of Russia by asking the Quai d'Orsay for a commitment to guarantee their protection?*

AO – Russia did not intervene militarily in Ukraine to conquer territory. Russia is already the largest country in the world, with a population of around 150 million, which is very few for such a large area. We do not need other people's land. We intervened because the rights of Russians and Russian speakers in this eastern part of Ukraine were being violated by Ukrainian nationalists. The first right of these people is to speak their mother tongue. That's partly why it all started. And then there was also this increasingly strong presence of NATO, whose military expansion threatened Ukraine, coming right up to our doorstep. With the Baltic States and Poland, our problems are historical, a bit like the case between France and Germany. You know

that Poland has been divided three times, so it's normal for the Poles to have some hang-ups. But once again, Russia has no interest today in sending troops anywhere. Tell me, what would be the point of that? Nothing. The same goes for the Baltic countries. They are very small countries, the population of Estonia is around 3 or 4 million; it's nothing, it's not even Paris. Let's be serious; it's completely stupid. I don't know if history is repeating itself in its genes. But in that case, it's infinite, and it works both ways. Take, for example, the invasions of the Teutonic Orders, which were German Catholic orders. They came to conquer Russia and impose the Catholic faith in the 13th century. These Teutonic orders were based in the Baltic States, with several generations on these lands. There was already animosity at that time. We don't think about it, but history is always present and plays a very important role. I could also draw the same parallel with our difficult relations with Sweden.

In the 18th century, Peter the Great defeated Charles XII in a terrible war. Three hundred years have passed, but the Swedes have not forgotten, and they will probably never forgive us. It is incredible to see that this presence of history is everywhere and is repeating itself. In any case, to come back to the question, I say that it is ridiculous since Russia does not need territorial conquests, and it has not been an issue for a long time. These fantasies are refrains that keep coming back; it's ridiculous. When you consider that Russia even proposed in 2021 to resolve the security problem diplomatically. As I said, this offer was not well received. We need to think about the future. When we resolve the conflict in Ukraine, peace between Russia and Ukraine should be consolidated by a major European agreement or treaty on security in Europe, going back to the origins of the conflict. And once again, I come back to what I said: we must also consider the Americans' grand design to cut Russia off from Europe. The reasoning is quite simple, but, understandably, a great power would want to prevent at all costs the rapprochement between two parts of a continent that could become a stronger pole...

TLP – *What future do you see for relations between our two countries, and more generally for relations between Russia and the West?*

AO – There must be a possible future since we cannot change geography. Russia and Europe will always be neighbours, and it is absolutely clear that it is better to be at peace with one's neighbour than at war. And then history also carries a lot of weight. I have given a few historical examples, some of them negative, but the future must be built on positive elements. With France, the Franco-Russian alliance or the era of General De Gaulle can be positive reference points in our shared history. Finally, there is a greater role to be played by culture. Russia's

contribution to the European nation on a cultural level is enormous, and vice versa. Language teaching is obviously part of this. When you start learning each other's languages, you start to take an interest in each other's history and culture. This creates deep bonds and is essential for cooperation. We are part of the same civilisation, the same family, and at some point, this family must come together despite any quarrels that may have arisen. We all have an interest in this. That's why I think there's a future. We must start things step by step. The first is to restore the lost trust, which is at zero today. To do this, we must stop all campaigns of hatred against each other and end the unnecessary sanctions, which are part of the same hatred. We must realise that we can only survive in a situation of peace and coexistence. Moreover, E. Macron recently used the word "coexistence", saying that it was the only way to live together with respect. He was right about that, too. I remember V. Giscard d'Estaing once telling me that our countries had different political systems, but that we respected each other, and that this allowed us to cooperate in our mutual interest. That is the keyword for the future: respect for others, their vision, and their interests. It is not about tolerance but respect; without these basic notions, balanced relationships cannot be built. It will surely take time, but it is not impossible. Initiatives such as the Trianon dialogue between civil societies and young people must also be increased. These links are fundamental to building the world of tomorrow together and not seeing two worlds confronting each other. To achieve this, we need to talk to each other because without dialogue, nothing is possible.

TLP – *In rebuilding this relationship and forging a new trust, do you think that France will have a special and privileged role to play?*

AO – I think that France must strive to have a privileged role since it is in the genes of the French to play the role of a political leader in Europe. France has the experience, the history, and the know-how that it has not yet entirely lost. I still know many former diplomatic colleagues at the Quai d'Orsay; they are all very professional, they know how to get things done, and they will be able to create the conditions for a political decision that will lead to a new understanding. But it is, above all, the President of the Republic who has great diplomatic power: by saying stop and stopping supporting confrontation, he would favour the phase of détente and cooperation. All hope is not lost for the future of our relations. I am confident, but I also think it will, unfortunately, take a long time. Let us remember that we cannot redo either history or geography; we are thus part of the same European family. On the contrary, we must learn and revere history in order to understand the future.

TLP – *Thank you very much, Mr. Ambassador.*

AO – Thank you, it was a pleasure.

CONCLUSION

The relations between the Russian and French nations date back several centuries, with the first traceable contact occurring more than 300 years ago through the appointment of the first ambassadors in each country. This early diplomatic exchange already constitutes a distinctive feature of the Franco-Russian relationship. Over the course of history, numerous events have contributed to the construction of the myth of a “privileged relationship” between Moscow and Paris. This thesis has examined the development of this narrative, highlighting how political elites on both sides actively drawn upon and reinforced this shared historical memory. Accordingly, the work has explored the various dynamics of the Franco-Russian relations and analysed the significant impact that the narrative of “special ties” has had on foreign policy and diplomatic initiatives - an influence that still persisted very recently.

The research sought to understand how this myth has coexisted with the fundamental objective of any state’s foreign policy: the defence of national interests. By engaging in its deconstruction, the study has questioned the historical authenticity of the myth and assessed its continued relevance, particularly at a time when it seems to be fading, or at the very least, widely contested. Through a chronological analysis of key diplomatic decisions and strategic choices, various examples have been examined to shed light on why the two countries sometimes aligned closely with one another, and, other times, found themselves in direct opposition.

Moreover, the European context played a central role in the reflection, as it offered multiple confrontations and contrasting interpretations of foreign policy. In this regard, Germany has provided a valuable point of comparison, allowing the work to be expanded through a contrastive approach to diplomatic strategies towards Russia. This external perspective, focusing on another state, confirmed the existence of the myth and underscored the relevance of its critical reassessment. Similarly, the press review presented in this same section (cf. I.3.2.), which highlights the views of various European countries on French diplomacy vis-à-vis Russia, further demonstrates that the myth’s influence was not only internal but also perceived by external interpretations, thereby reinforcing its resonance. Thus, the European dimension has provided a meaningful framework to understand the complexity of the Franco-Russian relationship.

This exercise of construction and deconstruction has been undertaken through the lens of discourse analysis, adapting the Narrative Analysis Model in International Relations to the case study. Various scholars were also selected to reinforce the research and clarify the methodological framework. Thanks to their approaches, the thesis has examined how the political discourses of French and Russian leaders contributed to the construction of the myth surrounding their relationship, as well as the reasons why both political elites have resorted to using it until recently, albeit narrative has progressively been losing its influence among diplomats and experts. Indeed, revisiting the myth has allowed for a deeper understanding of the challenges posed by the current situation. The recent deterioration of Franco-Russian relations has significantly accelerated the myth's decline and weakened its impact, culminating in an unprecedented rupture following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The events and reactions surrounding the war have definitively - and perhaps irreversibly - called into question the narrative, its function and its objectives. The current geopolitical landscape therefore reaffirms the relevance of this subject, even though many scholars have previously analysed Franco-Russian relations.

The thesis has addressed the research questions through a four-act structure. The first chapter consisted of an historical overview, recalling the centuries-old ties between France and Russia and emphasising specific areas of diplomatic cooperation - political, economic, cultural, etc. - as well as their interpretation and impact at the European level. This bilateral approach also made it possible to assess how developments in Franco-Russian relations were influenced by various multilateral arenas such as the EU, NATO, and BRICS.

The section has comprehended how the myth of a “privileged relation” between the two countries was constructed and why it was strategically used by both foreign policy actors. This narrative emerged from a series of concrete initiatives and distinctive events that brought the two countries closer throughout history. At the same time, this rapprochement functions as a virtuous circle: the growing closeness between Paris and Moscow served to legitimise the myth and reinforce its influence among political elites and diplomacy. Numerous initiatives were analysed to better understand these special bonds and shared foreign policy goals - from long-standing cultural and economic ties to successive wartime alliances, and more recent alignments on the international stage. For a long time, even facing difficult periods, their bilateral relations were widely regarded as “privileged”, a view echoed by their populations, who demonstrated mutual respect and sympathy until quite recently.

The “Russian question” remains a central issue in French foreign policy, reflecting the challenges of relying on Russia in the context of shifting geopolitical dynamics - even during episodes when the country was weaker - while aiming to integrate it into the post-Cold War world order. Conversely, these moments also reflected Russia’s effort to understand and support France in its pursuit of independence and ambition to be a political leader, from the post-war period to the evolving framework of the European Union. More recently, France has been one of the main European actors in contemporary crises such as Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014). This relatively active stance has reinforced a certain tradition within French diplomacy regarding Russia, shaped in part by the legacy of the so-called “privileged relationship”.

Lastly, even when the two countries stood in stark opposition - in terms of political models, ideological frameworks and diplomatic approaches - they did not turn their backs on each other. The Cold War period particularly illustrates this point: despite recurring tensions and fundamental differences, France and Soviet Russia also engaged in repeated attempts at rapprochement. Their relationship was strengthened by strategic convergences, notably a shared commitment to multilateralism and the emergence of a multipolar world order. The analyst Thomas Gomart aptly encapsulated this historical bond, reinforcing the notion of a “privileged relationship” between France and Russia: “*More generally, when we look at the Franco-Russian relationship over time, there are always more elements of continuity than of rupture*”.⁴²⁵

Identifying turning points through the same chronological approach, the second and the third chapters have revealed a far more complex reality: one of an intricate relationship that did not improve over time. By engaging in a critical deconstruction of the myth of “special bonds between two friends and allies”, these chapters focused on specific foreign policy decisions and stances, within respectively French diplomacy (Chapter 2) and Russian diplomacy (Chapter 3). As in the first chapter, concrete examples of bilateral diplomatic interactions served to illustrate and support the deconstruction of the myth. The decision to separate these two sections was deliberate: it aimed to clearly distinguish the respective roles of French and Russian diplomacy in shaping external action, in order to challenge the idea of a “privileged relationship”. To

⁴²⁵ Thomas Gomart and Gaëlle Vaillant, “France-Russie : ‘Dans La Continuité plus Que La Rupture,’” *Le Journal Du Dimanche*, June 1, 2012.

achieve this re-examination, particular emphasis was placed on the role of national interest in foreign policy, guided by the age-old concept of Realpolitik, which has proven to be a useful analytical tool, leading to two major conclusions.

The first key conclusion concerns the revelation of numerous historical moments in which France and Russia were fundamentally opposed in their diplomatic choices, sharply contrasting with the myth of the “privileged relationship” between two supposedly aligned states. Moreover, when both countries appeared effectively aligned, their cooperation was primarily driven by national interest rather than any genuine sense of special affinity. In this regard, many initiatives initially interpreted as signs of entente in the first chapter were re-examined through the lens of Realpolitik, offering a different understanding of the motivations behind each country’s foreign policy. In nearly every case, the pursuit of national interest prevailed. Following a gradual erosion caused by growing mutual misunderstandings, Franco-Russian relations have deteriorated significantly in recent international crises, such as Ukraine or Syria. More broadly, Russia has been distancing itself from Europe and several opportunities for rapprochement have been missed. The enlargement of the EU and NATO, as well as the implementation of the Eastern Partnership, were badly perceived by Russia, which did not share the same vision, particularly regarding what it considers to be its legitimate “spheres of influence”. A similar deconstruction was conducted at the European level, seriously questioning the impact of the Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis.

Confronting the complexity of these relations - from their historical roots to their most recent developments - has revealed that this so-called “special affinity” was far more intricate than it appeared, especially within the broader framework of the Eurasian dialogue. In this respect, the political analyst and researcher, David Cadier, offers a counterpoint to Thomas Gomart’s earlier assertion, stating: “*Analysts and policy-makers have been quick to assert a causal link between this historical-cultural proximity and France’s policy choices towards Russia. Yet in fact the two appear largely disconnected: during recent years, historical-cultural proximity has not necessarily translated into political substance, nor has it prevented- or been affected by - the recent deterioration of diplomatic ties*”.⁴²⁶

⁴²⁶ David Cadier, “Continuity and Change in France’s Policies towards Russia: A Milieu Goals Explanation,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 6 (November 1, 2018): 1349–69.

The second key finding further demonstrates the enduring influence of the myth, as well as its gradual decline in recent years within both French and Russian diplomacy. Despite multiple examples of divergence, this positive perception of one another persisted among large segments of political class until very recently. This helps explain why, even during periods of serious tension, the deterioration of bilateral relations remained progressive. A great part of each country's diplomatic corps, as well as many of their strategic positions, continued indeed to be shaped by this longstanding narrative. Before the war in Ukraine, the endeavours of Emmanuel Macron and Vladimir Putin to attempt a reset concretely illustrated this lasting resonance. In the aftermath of 2022, reactions to France's foreign policy shift further revealed that parts of French diplomacy were still influenced by the narrative, even though this turnaround ultimately led to an unprecedented fracture. The process of deconstructing the myth has therefore also served to illuminate its impact while analysing its decline up to the present day. In this context, the research has concluded that pragmatism seems to have taken precedence over symbolic narratives in the foreign policy strategies of both countries.

Finally, the thesis placed considerable emphasis on incorporating external perspectives, by presenting the viewpoints of two actors directly involved in their country's foreign policies. Thus, two interviews were conducted with Ambassadors from both countries, whose firsthand experiences on the ground contributed originally to the research. Integrating this sociological and active contribution provided valuable insights into the issues previously examined, enriched by these unique testimonies. One diplomat from each "side" - Moscow and Paris - offered a fair and balanced perspective, with the dual points of view giving the most accurate reflection of the complex reality of the relationship.

In conclusion, Franco-Russian ties have witnessed periods of great closeness, as well as harsh adversity, resulting in a complex and often inconsistent relationship. This reality challenges the long-standing narrative that has traditionally framed the links between Paris and Moscow. Depending on the period and the foreign policy orientations pursued by both countries, the thesis has shown that the influence of the myth has varied, reflecting the continuous oscillation in the interactions between France and Russia, up to the present day.

From the Russian perspective, while the myth has greatly influenced certain decisions over time, the evolution of France's global position has been a key factor in the decline of the myth's hold over Russian political elites. Considered to be less autonomous, France's diminishing

capacity to conduct an independent foreign policy contributed to Russia's disillusionment. Rooted in a relationship where French diplomacy once represented a powerful and sovereign state, the democratic and European transformation underway in France weakened its influence in Moscow and affected their bilateral relationship.

By contrast, for the French political class, Russia has largely remained an enigma, with an immense territory long perceived as lying on the fringes of Europe. Although the myth of the "privileged relationship" has exerted considerable impact on French diplomacy, Paris has often displayed its profound disagreements. In a similarly paradoxical way, Moscow's political evolutions have greatly disappointed France which - although it had hoped the opposite for many years - witnessed the hardening of Russian power and its limits in conforming to the Western political order (in terms of international law, values, etc.). Recently, the image of Russia as an authoritarian country - in which political opposition is allegedly repressed, freedom of expression is curtailed, and the rule of law is disregarded - has been cultivated at official level. Consequently, French elites have gradually shifted toward prioritising NATO and the EU and adjusted France's foreign policy. This dimension has gained even greater significance today, as France's policy reversal has been fully completed, even sparking the interest of Central European capitals. As a result, French foreign policy has taken a much firmer stance toward Moscow, marking a clear departure from the narrative traditionally advocated by French diplomacy since the Gaullist tradition. Gradually, the recognition that France could no longer influence Russia or advance key issues despite the narrative influence led to an unprecedented break. By fully distancing itself from the myth of the "special relationship" with Moscow, Paris has reclaimed a stronger position within the EU.

France and Russia currently stand at a turning point in light of today's geopolitical context. Rebuilding relations on such foundations appears highly complex, and the future of their bilateral ties after the settlement of the war in Ukraine remains difficult to predict, especially since the crisis has driven both countries toward increasingly antagonistic positions. While France is seeking to assert leadership within a European defence framework that inherently excludes Moscow, Russia has embarked on an eastward shift, reorienting its strategy toward Asia. This pivot, though partly accentuated by the Western sanctions and diplomatic isolation imposed since 2014, is also anchored in a long-standing Russian strategic vision that has enabled Vladimir Putin to circumvent the West's containment efforts. Hence, there is considerable uncertainty regarding the future of Franco-Russian relations and the potential

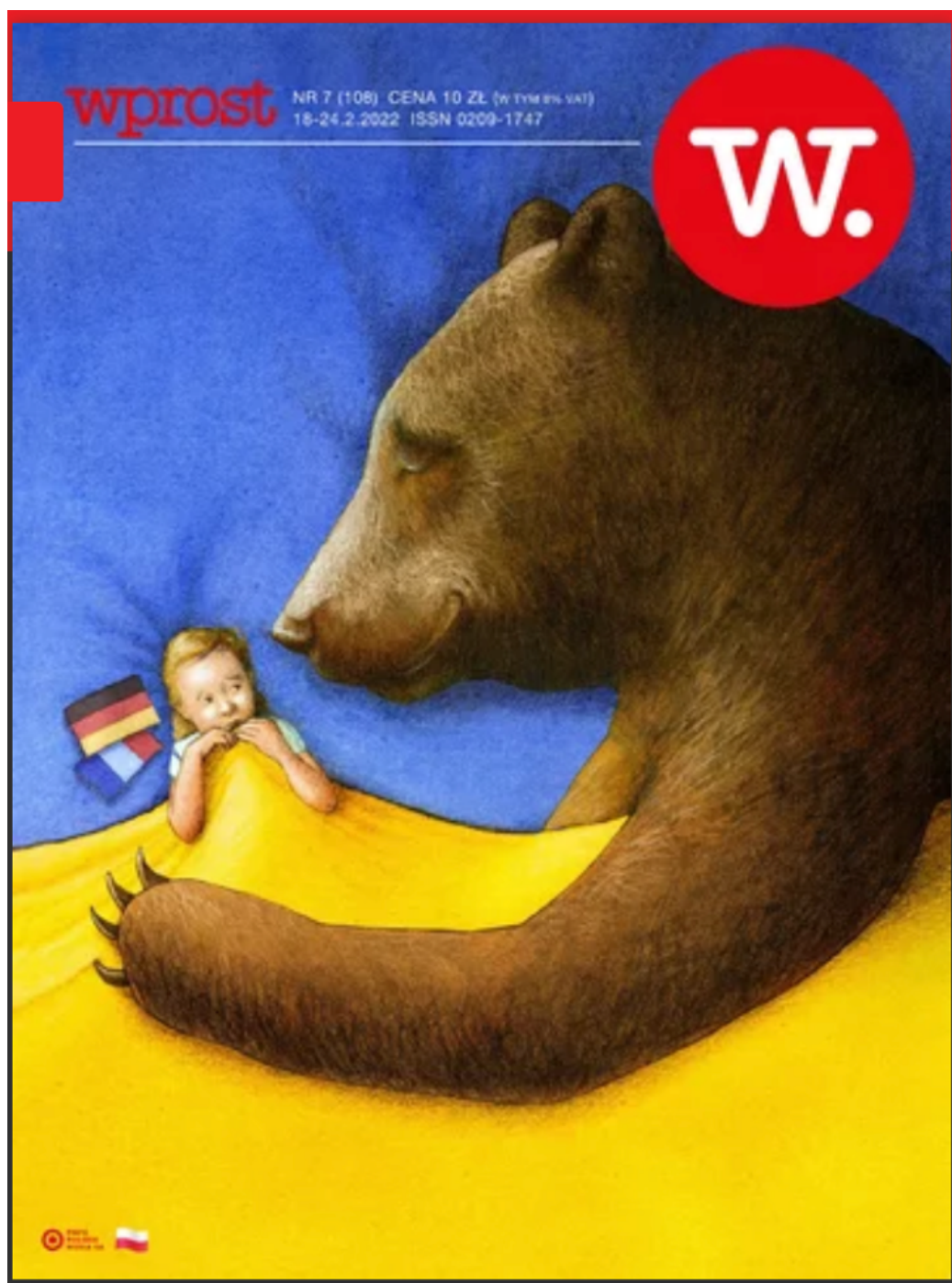
survival of the myth of the “privileged relationship” between Paris and Moscow. However, shifting the current atmosphere of confrontation toward a form of mutually acceptable and beneficial cooperation cannot be entirely ruled out. In such a scenario, the respective diplomatic corps of both countries might draw on historical precedents to reactivate a narrative that, in the past, had already proven diplomatically useful. In any case, bilateral relations between France and Russia will have to be reinvented within a context of unstable global power dynamics, particularly illustrated by the evolving positions of the United States and China.

What paths will these two nations take in the coming years? Which diplomatic strategies will ultimately prevail?

These are questions that will require close and ongoing attention.

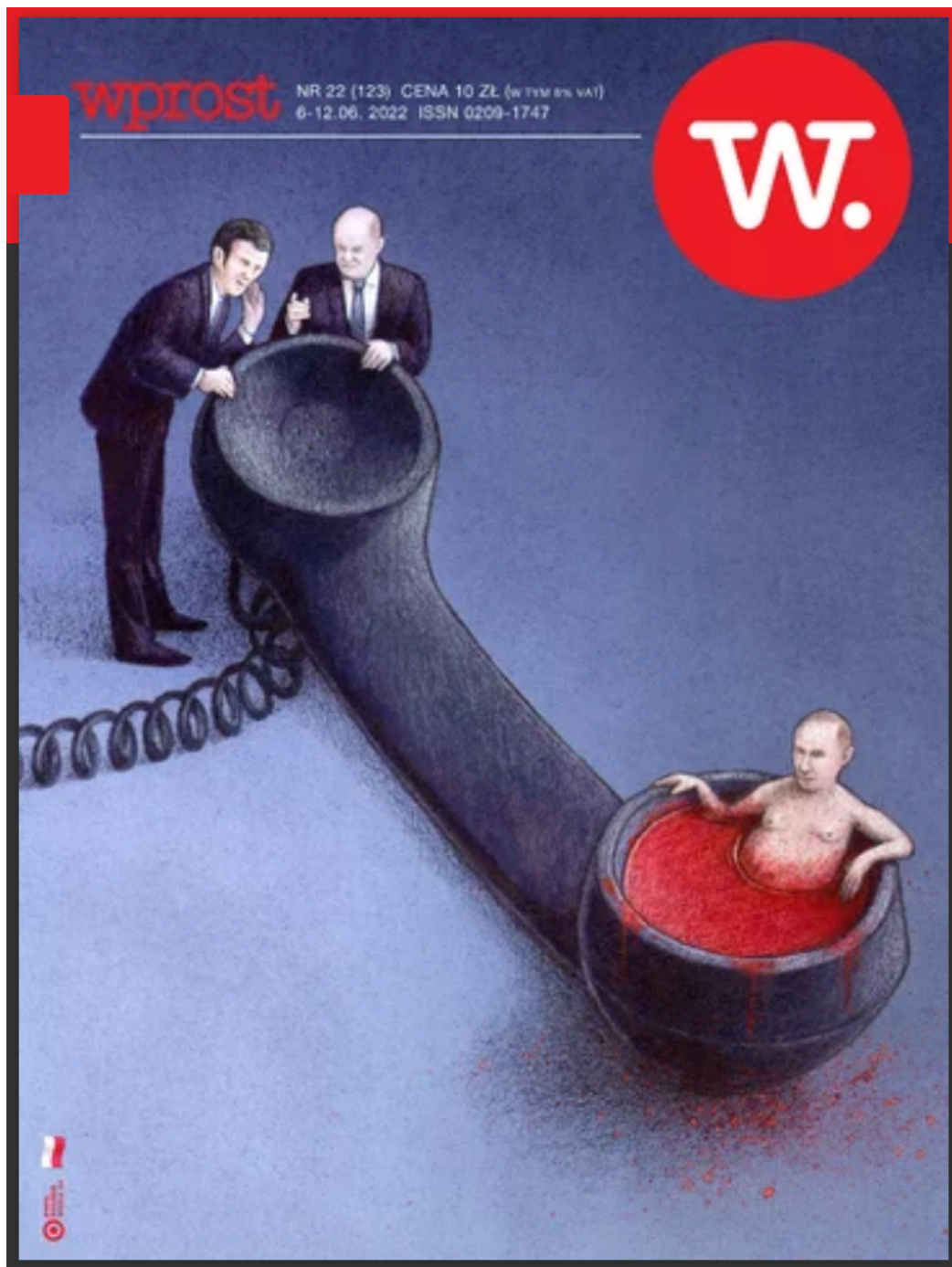
Appendices

Figure 1: Wprost Front Page, 18-24 February 2022 Edition.



Source : <https://www.wprost.pl/tygodnik/archiwum/2024/Wprost-7-2022.html>

Figure 2: Wprost Front Page, 6-12 June, 2022 Edition



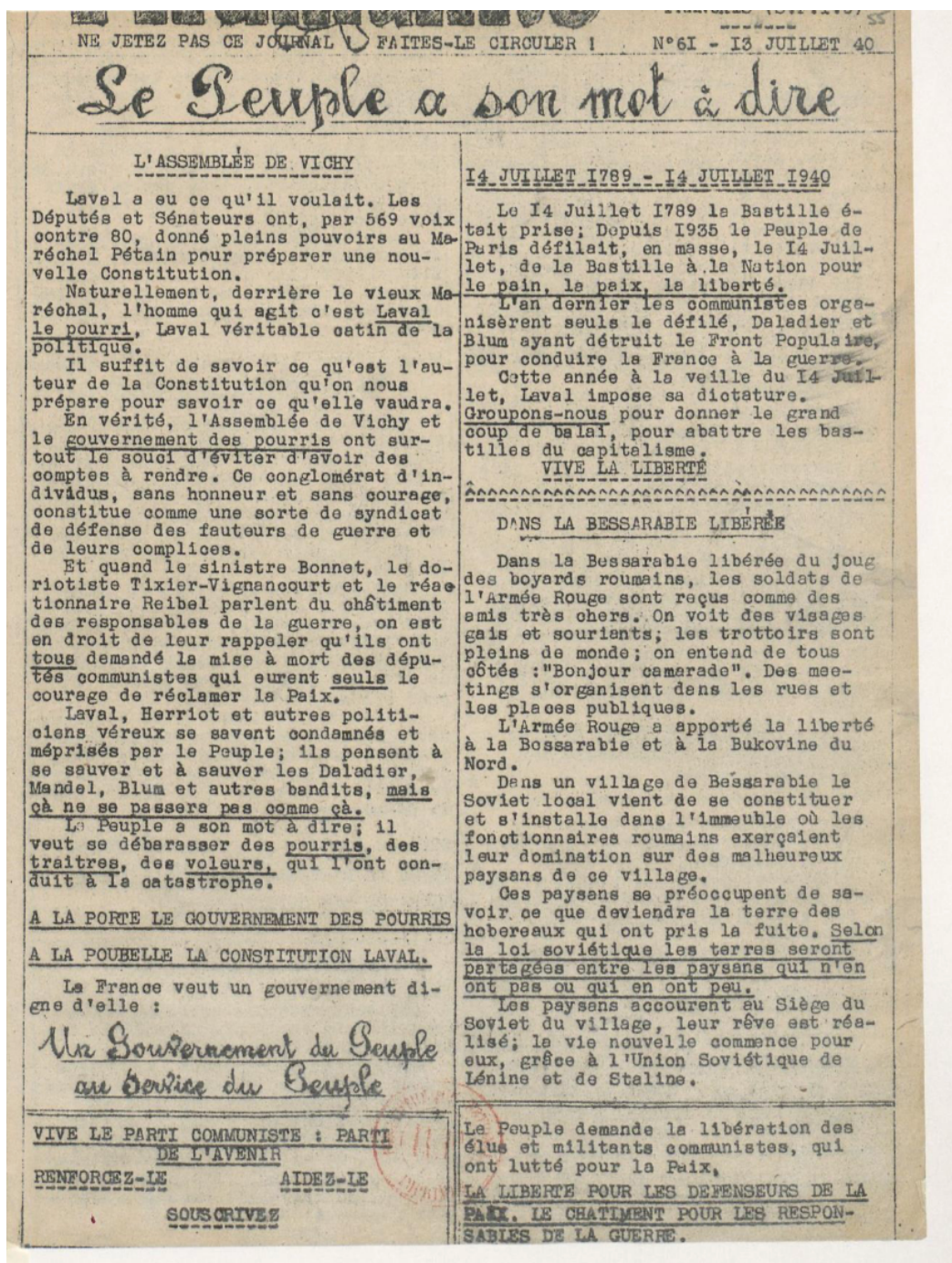
Source : <https://www.wprost.pl/tygodnik/archiwum/2039/Wprost-22-2022.html>

Figure 3: Vyacheslav Molotov with Adolf Hitler in Berlin, Pravda Front page, November 18, 1940, Edition.



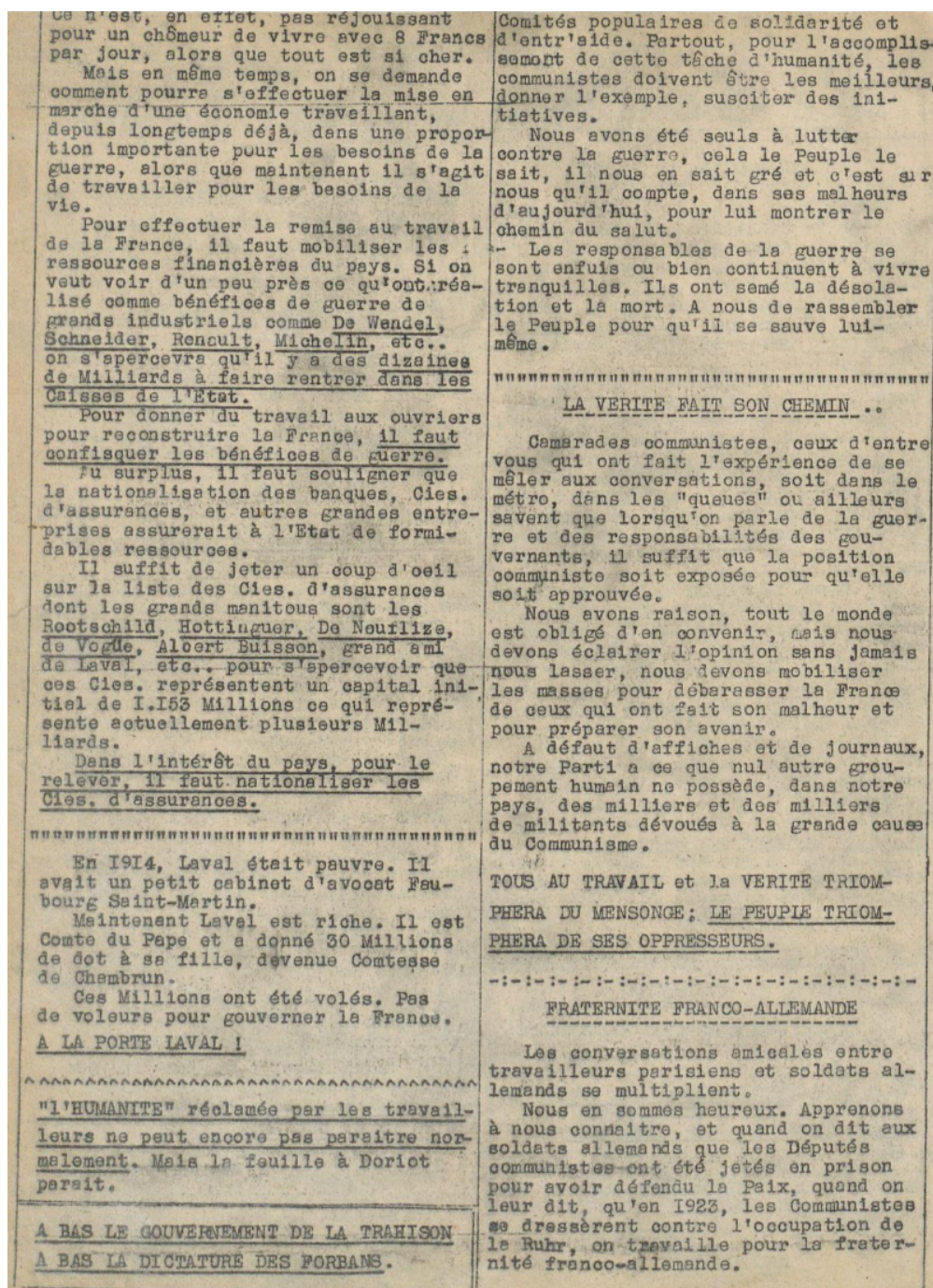
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Правда_18.11.1940.png

Figure 4: *L'Humanité* Front Page, July 13, 1940 Edition



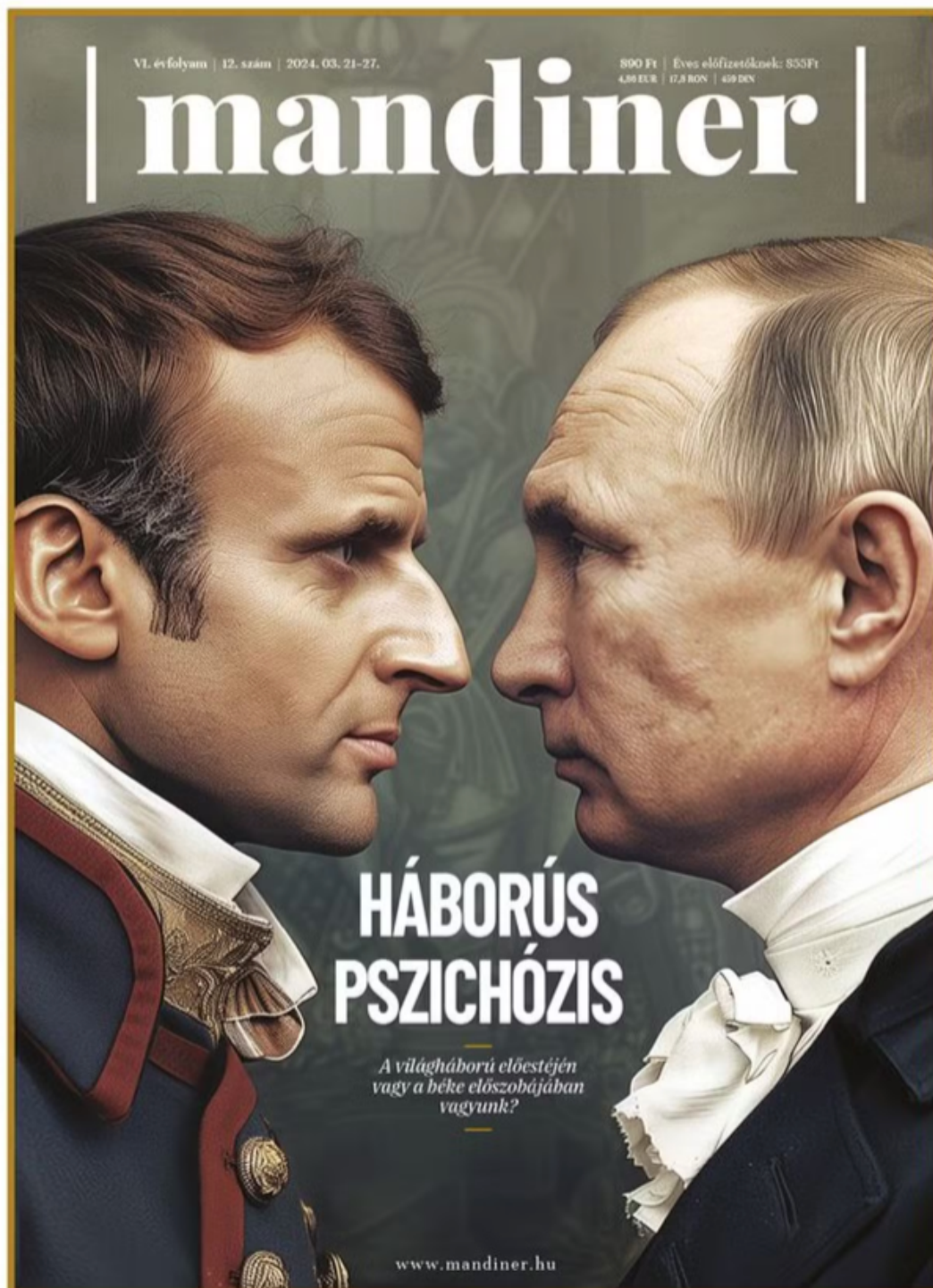
Source: <https://www.retronews.fr/journal/lhumanite-zone-nord/13-jul-1940/4664/5763462/2>

Figure 5: *L'Humanité* Second Page, July 13, 1940 Edition



Source: <https://www.retronews.fr/journal/lhumanite-zone-nord/13-jul-1940/4664/5763462/2>

Figure 6: Mandiner Front Page, 21-27 March 2024 Edition.



Source: <https://mandiner.hu/kulfold/2024/03/macron-ralicial-oroszorszagra>

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