

Emmanuel Macron's Quinquennat

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DECEMBER 2021

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When campaigning for the presidential elections in 2017, Emmanuel Macron, leader of the newly created En Marche! party, had promised several reforms in French domestic policies, and on the European as well on the global stage. Now that he is on the verge of entering his official campaign for re-election in spring 2022 it is timely to evaluate which reforms he could carry out, and what are the elements of his earlier ambition that he could not achieve – at least not in this term. It is obvious though, that he plans on staying in power, especially because most of his reforms were set to deliver their result after the end of this first quinquennat. This paper aims at evaluating the impact of both his domestic reforms and initiatives for Europe, shedding some light on the recent overture from France towards the Visegrád countries and vice versa.

In 2017 on the occasion of the French presidential campaign the French but also all Europeans could meet a young and ambitious candidate who seemed determined to fundamentally reform his country and envisioned a route ahead for Europe too. But what could he deliver of all those promises in the midst of severe social upheaval and the COVID-19 pandemic and how will his achievements influence his chances for re-election in 2022? Did his political stance change during this quinquennat; and if yes, can this change benefit the members of the V4?

Introduction

In 2017 Emmanuel Macron appeared on the French political scene as rather an outsider as he was not aligned to any party established by the traditional political elite. This even helped him win the election as he was seen as a potential president that

could at last reform France and lead the country out from the constant decline it was in for decades. The other element of the success of his campaign was that he appeared as an absolutely pro-European leader firmly believing that France can only be successful if Europe is successful too and that Europe is stronger united than divided.

Almost five years have passed and he campaigns again for the 2022 presidential elections, even if only remotely, as he has not announced his official candidature yet. Next spring, according to the opinion polls he will most certainly go to the second round with a strong probability that he wins that too.¹ In such a situation I think it is timely to evaluate what he could deliver from his earlier ambitions, not only those that he has already realised but also those that are in the process of realisation. On the domestic scene he set three important objectives: reform the economy, the society and politics. Such a huge endeavour if we think that these are the three elemental pillars of any political community. Moreover, regarding the European Union he advocated for a strong, united and sovereign Europe that is able to defend itself and to act as one in the global arena. It is true that many of his reforms were carried out in France and a lot of European policies were launched upon his initiative for Europe, in spite of the fact that his term turned out to be a very rocky road where he was challenged by the yellow vest movement, the COVID-19 pandemic and the social crisis many say France now faces.

Now, four months before the next presidential elections in France we can attempt to evaluate his presidency. In the course of these five years he changed a little bit his political stance swinging sometimes to the right and sometimes to the left from the political centre he claims to be positioned in; and now on the European scene he seems to be looking for new allies, which he proved by participating at the meeting of the leaders of the V4 countries in Budapest.

Grand design for France

President Emmanuel Macron, in his campaign, focussed mostly on the modernisation of the economy, the reform of the French political and public life, while sticking up for the idea of Europe and France's EU membership.

What did he promise in his campaign?

National economy

In the heart of his 2017 programme, we could find the objective to reduce public spending. He aimed to achieve this, by saving EUR 25 billion thanks to the modernisation of public services, namely the reduction of staff by 120 000 positions.ⁱⁱ Moreover, by reforming unemployment insurance and the health insurance systems he had hoped to save further EUR 15 billion and EUR 10 billion respectively. In addition to reducing public spending the aforementioned ways, he also promised to make huge state investments worth EUR 50 billion divided among the fields of education and training, ecological and energy transition, healthcare, agriculture, public services and infrastructure. Another focal point of his programme was to increase the purchasing power by reducing social security contributions and by exonerating the residence tax for 80% of households. He also wanted to expand the eligibility for unemployment insurance also for those that resign, but limit their access to it to once in every five years.ⁱⁱⁱ

French political and social system, environmental issues

In an attempt to reform the French political system he also announced that he wished to put an end to the accumulation of mandates in the public sphere by maximising the number of offices an individual can have in three, and that it would be forbidden for elected officials and ministers to appoint their family members for any official position.^{iv} The president also wanted to reduce the number of senators and representatives in addition to reforming how institutions work. In the meantime, he also set to reduce class sizes in primary education. He also made it very clear that he does not wish to leave nuclear energy behind, but that he finds it very important to diversify the French energy mix. Still on the issue of environmental protection he pledged to improve isolation rates on the French housing park, modernise the vehicle park and to contribute funds for environmental research. What is more, he proposed a plan to offer bio ingredients for school canteens, so that 50% of food offered there come from bio production.^v

What did he achieve?

As the end of his mandate approaches the question arises: Did he keep all his promises pronounced during his campaign and at the beginning of his office? He certainly had several obstacles to overcome, starting from the protests organised by the yellow-vest movement to the economic and health crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Economic achievements

Evaluating his economic achievements, first of all we have to assess what changes he was able to bring to the chronically high French unemployment rate. In 2017 he promised to reduce it to 7% by 2022, yet the year before the end of his term it stagnates around 8% having increased due to the pandemic from a record low of 7.1% in July 2020.^{vi} It is now questionable though whether this promise can be kept in the new economic reality, but he might have had a chance to keep his word had it not been for COVID-19.

An announcement he was heavily criticised for especially from the left-wing electorate was to reduce corporate taxes to 25% from the previous rate of 33.3%. The process of lowering this tax to the target figure is in progress, currently standing at 26.5% and projected to reach 25% by the end of this quinquennat. Another very controversial proposal from Macron's Élysée, - which was eventually implemented, - was to eliminate the wealth tax and replace it with a real estate wealth tax demanded only in case the real estate in question is worth more than EUR 1.3 million. As for the public spending being reduced by EUR 60 billion, the outcome is uncertain. As a result of the yellow vest movement the reduction of public spending against the GDP has been much slower than projected, it only decreased from 56.5% to 55.4% of the GDP during the period 2017-2019. Afterwards, however, with the surplus of public spending needed to counter the effects of the pandemic it grew to 62.1% of the GDP overall.^{vii}

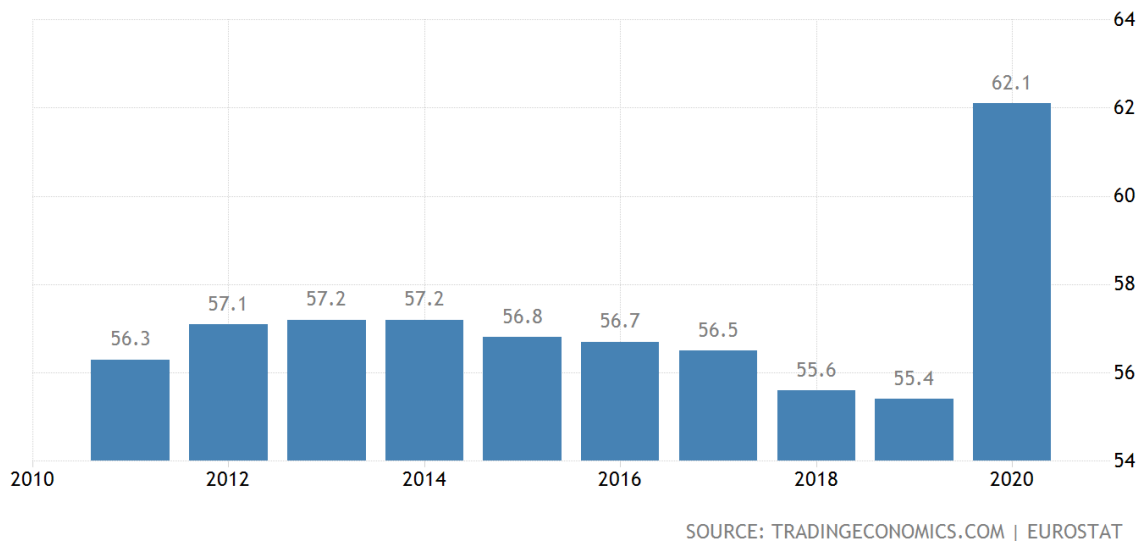


Figure 1: French government spending to GDP, Source: Trading Economics^{viii}

A focal point of his campaign was to reform the labour market and introduce new measures regarding employment. He proposed to open the opportunity for those resigning from their positions to have access to unemployment benefits once every five years. It was in the end implemented, however the measures applied in this case considerably restrict the access to these benefits, as the individual in question must prove that there is an on-going project related to professional development, that later has to be accepted as necessary on the national labour market by the authorities. Quite similarly, he also works towards offering an unemployment aid to every worker, be it employee or entrepreneur. In reality though this means a marginal amount of EUR 800 a month for a period of 6 months applying only for entrepreneurs^{ix}, while for employees, regulations remained the same as before. Another huge undertaking in the field of work was the promised reform of the labour code. Right after taking office, he started working on this immense project, that he managed to bring to success by the end of the first year of his mandate.^x

In relation to improving employment in France, Emmanuel Macron also pledged to strengthen the purchasing power of the French workers. In order to achieve that he promised to lower the employer's contribution, which he managed to keep, meaning a 2% gain for each worker. Moreover, he pledged to eliminate the residence tax for people belonging to the middle or working class. This means that by 2020 80% of French households were free of this tax. To bring further this huge achievement the

remaining 20% of households will also see this tax obligation disappear by 2023. In an attempt to ease even further tax burdens, he also kept his word regarding the fact that remuneration of overtime work is not taxed any more. As for the controversial reform of retirement its realisation had to be suspended due to heavy protests and the COVID-19 crisis. Another project at halt aims at synchronising the payment of all social contributions.^{xi} Despite all his efforts in order to increase the purchasing power, - due to the high inflation rate within the eurozone^{xii}, - his achievements will only be temporary.

Lacking success in social and political fields

In his great design for France President Macron also promised to increase security in the country, a reassuring engagement for the right-wing electorate. He proposed to achieve more security by creating 15 000 additional prison places, a promise he could only partly keep, as the engagement will only be fulfilled by 2027. In addition to this he also wished to enhance national security by increasing the number of law enforcement personnel by 10 000, this engagement is, on the other hand, very close to being fulfilled, by the end of 2022 according to projections. Considering education, he took his plan through legislation which had the objective of reducing the size of classes during the first two years of primary education to 12 pupils per class. He also promised to introduce a culture pass for students under 18 years, worth 500 euros, yet in effect the pass only offers 300 euros to its beneficiaries.^{xiii}

When he entered the campaign for the presidential elections of spring 2017, the main attribute that distinguished him from his opponents was that he did not come from any of the well-established, mainstream historical parties of the French political scene, carrying the promise of modernisation of the rigid political system stoned in French administration. A huge task that neither him, nor his two governments managed to do so far. He failed at reducing the size of National Assembly and the number of senators, at introducing a dose of proportionality in the legislative elections, at obliging political parties to respect equality when submitting candidates for a position, and at eliminating at least a quarter of the existing *départements*. On the other hand, he partially managed to achieve the moralisation of politics by introducing new measures regarding ex-politicians' pensions and official posts for family members of elected representatives.^{xiv}

Increasing attention towards environmental issues

In environmental issues he was less fervent in his campaign, yet during the first half of his presidency he realised that he should take a stronger stance for environmental protection. He engaged France into high level multilateral environmental conferences, such as the One Planet Summit for instance. In order to involve the population more in environmental protection a citizen's convention was established, the recommendation of which were later implemented into legislation. In the framework of *France Relance*, the project designated for the post-pandemic economic recovery EUR 30 billion out of the total amount of EUR 100 billion will be spent on the ecological transition. To this effect the French government pledged to support the purchase of environmentally friendly cars, the modernisation of the French housing park and the creation of low-emission zones in major cities.^{xv}

Unanticipated circumstances

At the moment of his election as President of the French Republic Emmanuel Macron could not have counted with the devastating consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, that hit France particularly hard, and forced the President to alter his grand design for France. Before the health and economic crisis hit the country Macron's government managed to implement some of his proposed reforms even if they were met by a vivid opposition from the public. He failed to convince the electorate of the necessity of the reforms as a result, President Macron had to face huge and violent protests across the country. Just to mention the most fervent ones, there was of course the yellow vest movement, followed by a major railway strike paralysing the country for weeks during the winter of 2019/2020. Despite the effort to bring the political elite closer to the voters still 75% of the population considers the national social system to be unjust, 79% associates something negative to the term politics, and 85% believes politicians do not care about their concerns. Not surprisingly therefore, the percentage of non-voters rises with every single suffrage. In the 2017 presidential elections only 25.4% did not vote, while in the parliamentary elections the same year this rate rose to 57.4%, to increase to 60% in the local elections last June.^{xvi}

Grand design for Europe

Not long after Emmanuel Macron was elected as President of the French Republic, he delivered a speech at the Amphitheatre of the University of Sorbonne on 26 September 2017 entitled Initiative for Europe.^{xvii} His initiative and its implementation influences all EU member states including Hungary and the other three V4 countries. There are of course recommendations the Hungarian government welcomes and pledges to contribute to their realisation, however, there are some issues the two countries conduct lively debates about.^{xviii} Moreover, there is every other member state, whose views should be taken into consideration when implementing the initiated reforms of the European Union.

A sovereign Europe

In this speech, the first point he elaborated on was sovereignty. He has brought a new concept into public discussion, which is European sovereignty, instead of or complementing the traditional idea of national sovereignty. He is apparently convinced that the EU will not be able to succeed in not long run, unless it forges some sort of a sovereignty of its own. On the contrary, especially for Hungary and Poland, preserving national sovereignty is preponderant and they advocate for an EU based more on intergovernmental cooperation rather than on a supranational one. This idea is heavily supported by one of President Macron's major domestic opponents for the 2022 elections, Marine Le Pen, leader of the right-wing *Rassemblement National*.^{xix}

The President first advocated for a Europe that is able to defend itself, that is able to ensure the protection and security of its citizens. This can only be achieved if a European strategic autonomy is established, which is firmly backed by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.^{xx} In 2017, the French President outlined the need for a joint intervention force, a joint defence budget, and a joint doctrine for action. In addition to that he also proposed the creation of a European Defence Fund, a permanent structured cooperation and a European intervention initiative where a real integration of European armies could take place. The European Defence Fund, was created in 2017 as proposed, on the initiative of the European Commission. The Fund's main objective is to ensure interoperability among European military by supporting projects in order to improve capabilities. The budget the fund operates with for the financial period of 2021-2027 is EUR 8 billion in total.^{xxi}

Only shortly after this, the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) was also established, in December 2017. PESCO is in fact a framework, introduced in the Lisbon Treaty with the aim to deepen defence cooperation between those EU member states that are able and willing to do so. So far 25 countries have joined PESCO, where the joint defence capabilities can be used in national or multinational operations. All V4 countries joined the cooperation and they participate in projects realised under its egis.^{xxii} The European Intervention Initiative (E2I) on the other hand, was launched in 2018 outside the EU institutions in order to create a European strategic culture, facilitating future joint missions and operations. The Visegrád countries do not participate in this framework, despite that the E2I has a clearly European focus, and it functions in parallel with PESCO.^{xxiii}

Remaining still at the issue of security, the president touched upon the phenomenon of terrorism, and the fight against it, that, in his view should be executed in a more Europeanised framework. As a consequence, he suggested that a European intelligence academy should be established, where it would be easier to join forces when it comes to the detection of jihadist networks active in Europe and in the prevention of terrorist attacks planned against European targets. The European Intelligence Academy in fact was created back in 2013 as a forum for international cooperation in the field of intelligence.^{xxiv} As a result, instead of developing the previously existing institution, based on President Macron's initiative the Intelligence College in Europe was created in 2019, with the goal of forging a real European intelligence culture, that despite the pre-existing framework had not emerged until then.^{xxv}

A sovereign Europe in President Macron's vision is not only able to guarantee security, but it can also tackle the migration issue successfully. In his view in order to be able to respond to the migration crisis it would be necessary to create a common area of borders, within which European countries would be able to unify asylum processes facilitating the integration of new arrivals into European society and culture.^{xxvi} Although this initiative has been supported by President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, in reality, no tangible measures have been put in place. President Macron also suggested that a European Asylum Office should be established in order to accelerate procedures, while biometric identification could be further elaborated. In the meantime, in his opinion European countries should gradually

create a common border police and fund common integration programmes for refugees. The migration issue is a field where the French President has approached his position to that of the V4. This latter group is very united in this question and firmly believes that European countries should preserve their culture and protect their borders from illegal entrances.^{xxvii}

Another focal point that President Macron wants to emphasise within the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is the Mediterranean region and Africa. It is true that France has always been interested in increasing European presence on the Mediterranean Sea, and promote security and stability on the African continent, as it is one of the main theatres for containing terrorism targeting European countries. He advocates for a new partnership between the two neighbouring continents especially in the field of education, health and energy transition.^{xxviii} The main goal for France is to prevent further destabilisation in the Sahel Belt, where there is already a significant number of French troops. The main objective of the *Opération Barkhane* is to eliminate terrorist groups from the region.^{xxix} Here Hungary contributes troops to the TAKUBA task force as the Hungarian government believes that problems such as terrorism are better solved where they first appear.^{xxx}

In President Macron's view globalisation brings several benefits, that Europe can and should exploit, which on the long run will strengthen its collective sovereignty. In order to achieve that, he raised his voice for a common framework of innovation and regulation, that would enable the EU to adapt to the challenges of the digital world. Important to mention, that Hungary is keen on joining this endeavour. This common framework, according to the French position should also entail a common financing mechanism, alongside with regularisation in the field of new and innovative digital projects.^{xxxi} Partly as a result of the speech, the European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency (CINEA) was established earlier this year. Its mission is to combine European technological improvement with sustainable development, in order to secure a place for the continent in this highly competitive sector, that most probably will gain in relevance in the upcoming decades.^{xxxii}

Sustainability

Despite having been one of the most active countries in green diplomacy even before this quinquennat, the Macron government managed to take France's engagements

even one step further. Already back in 2017 he called upon the European community to work together for a sustainable development. Interestingly, in President Macron's rhetoric fighting against climate change and fighting against inequality appear on the same platform, as he highlights how much more socially disadvantaged groups suffer from the consequences of global warming. According to him, Europe must boost investment targeting energy transition. Back in 2017 his main proposal was to introduce a carbon tax and a minimum price of carbon in order to make it less affordable, an idea that in France led to the formation of the yellow vest movement. In addition to this, he believes that Europe should also invest in the manufacturing of clean vehicles and the related infrastructure.

Still on the issue of sustainability he elaborated on his thought related to food sovereignty, that he thinks Europe should achieve in order to preserve its sovereignty in general. He set out a plan to reform the Common Agricultural Policy, which so far has been untouchable in the EU especially because of the French. As Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán affirmed on the occasion of the joint press conference after the meeting of the leaders of the Visegrád group and French President Macron, Hungary also considers a Europe that boasts of a strong agricultural sector to be the cornerstone of future development. Another point where they could agree during their negotiations was the importance of nuclear energy in the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy. Both politicians advocate that the best substitute of fossil fuels in the energy sector is the nuclear energy.^{xxxiii}

A united Europe

In addition to strengthening European sovereignty, President Macron also advocated for a more united Europe. He proposed to achieve this unity through the tangible realisation of social and fiscal convergence in the EU, but at least amongst Eurozone member states. He also put forward the idea that access to EU solidarity funds should be restricted to those countries that are willing to move towards common criteria established in the field of social and fiscal convergence. To detail it even further, he mentioned there should be a corporate tax corridor on the fiscal level and he brought up the need for the introduction of a minimum wage tailored to the economic situation of every single member state.^{xxxiv} As for the introduction of a minimum wage in every

EU country, it has been on the table for a very long time and it will be a focal point on the agenda of the upcoming French EU Presidency as well.^{xxxv}

Unity in President Macron's vision must also be pronounced on the cultural side. Sharing knowledge and respecting each other's culture can create a real feeling of belonging that can cement together very diverse and different European societies. He also recommended that each and every young European should spend at least half a year in another European country. In practice, this would involve 50% of students by 2024. Furthermore, he deemed it indispensable that every young European should speak at least two European languages by 2024. Following up on this idea, he also mentioned that a European network of universities should be created, allowing students to spend some time abroad without disrupting their study programme. Universities joining this network should offer classes in at least two European languages.

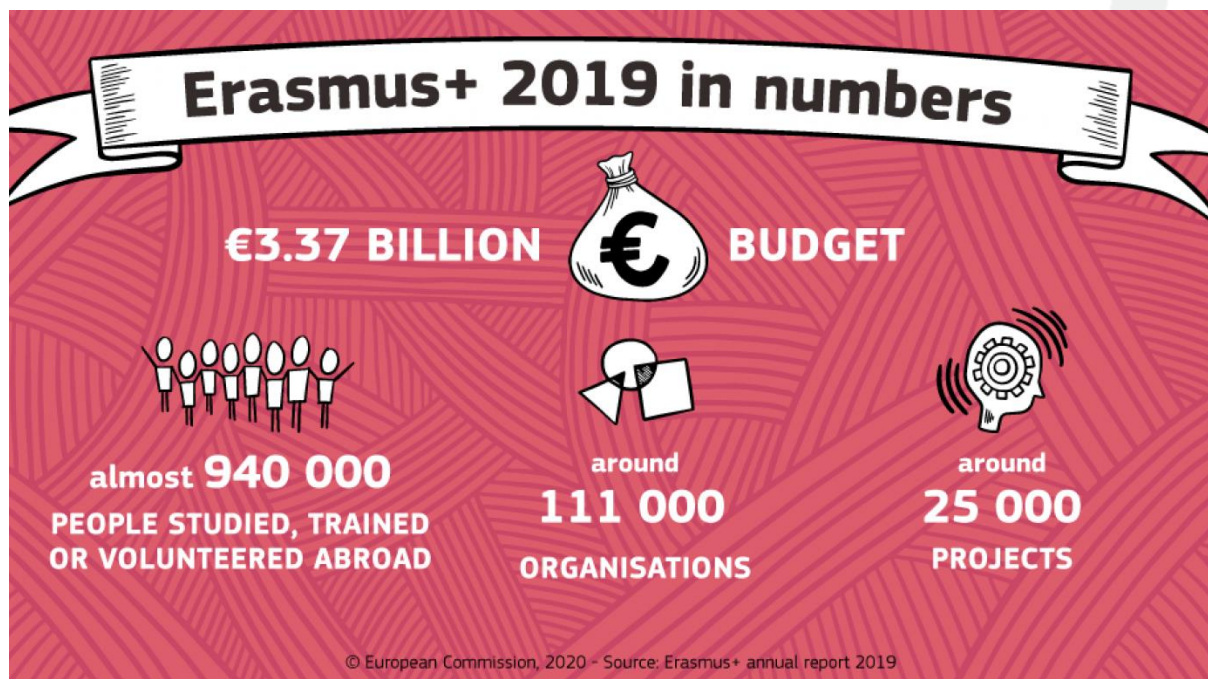


Figure 2: Erasmus+ 2019 in numbers, Source: European Commission^{xxxvi}

In his view it is not sufficient to create a united system for higher education within the EU but he would also like to extend such a system to secondary education too, thus granting mutual recognition to diplomas obtained in any EU member state.^{xxxvii} Erasmus and Erasmus+ programmes continued to be available for university students wanting to spend time abroad, however the obligatory semester spent abroad has not

yet been introduced, and the course of its implementation might become even longer, now that the COVID-19 pandemic imposed a halt on international mobility. On the matter of a more united secondary education the initiative to build a European Education Area by 2025 was put into motion. It would entail automatic mutual recognition of higher education, upper secondary education and training qualifications.^{xxxviii}

A democratic Europe

In 2017 he proposed a new kind of democracy, where he intended to bring the people closer to Europe, by implementing the same method he applied in his campaign on the way to the 2017 elections, namely citizens' conventions, that in the European framework are called democratic conventions.^{xxxix} He also proposed a reform of the European Parliament in order to democratise it even further, by introducing transnational lists at the 2019 elections, occupying the now vacant chairs of British MEPs. This system was not operative however in 2019, the debate is still ongoing whether in 2024 it will or will not be.^{xl} He brought up the question of the reform of the European Commission again, namely that the number of the commissioners should be reduced to fifteen. This idea is backed by some, although opposed by the majority of member states, that resulted in the Von der Leyen commission counting 27 commissioners, as many as member states there are.

Democracy is a focal point of President Macron's initiative for Europe. On this issue President Macron, Prime Minister Orbán and Prime Minister Morawiecki had debates about during their negotiations on 13 December 2021 as it was evoked at the press conference. As both President Macron and Prime Minister Orbán confirmed they are political adversaries, yet they are European partners that intend to cooperate in order to create a strong Europe that is able to meet the challenges of the 21st century.^{xli} For the French President and in a way for the non-eurozone Visegrád countries a multi-speed Europe might seem acceptable. This would mean that the willing and able member states could advance their integration, while there would remain the option not to join certain European policies. The only thing the Visegrád members object about this idea is the formation of a core of Europe constituted by the Franco-German axis.^{xlii}

In French domestic politics the European project is often mentioned in connection to the Franco-German axis, that for Paris has remained a priority. The Sorbonne speech was delivered before Angela Merkel's last coalition government was formed, yet the French side prompted its partner to establish an ever-deeper cooperation. Accordingly, President Macron invited Germany to renew the Élysée Treaty, and as a result, they signed the Aachen Treaty on 22 January 2019. Already in 2017 President Macron made it clear that he wanted the Franco-German tandem to lead EU reforms, being the fastest moving element in a multispeed EU. Yet, the magnitude of his vision preoccupied Berlin, as Germany prefers to move forward more prudently, especially in the field of security, defence and foreign policies. The fact that the reform of the monetary union was only a limited part of the speech shows that for the French President bringing Berlin along his plans is an absolute priority.^{xliii}

The timing of the speech was not the most fortunate, however President Macron could not have known that German coalition talks would drag on for so long. Angela Merkel herself found this initiative too ambitious, which did not help the French cause. Nonetheless it seems that these two countries have achieved a lot more with their cooperation since 2017 than for decades before. It was the result of their collaboration that Ursula von der Leyen was chosen to be head of the European Commission in 2019, and since then she initiated the realisation of several projects brought to the table by Paris. She also stands for a more activist industrial strategy, up-to-date technology policies, and a stronger, more independent European defence. It is also worth mentioning the French President's other close ally amongst the heads of EU institutions, Christine Lagarde leading the European Central Bank.^{xliv} Now, almost a quinquennat later a new German government is formed headed by the leader of the Social Democratic Party Olaf Scholz. Apparently, he intends to honour the strong ties historically established between Berlin and Paris, as his first journey abroad as German chancellor led to the Élysée Palace on 10 December 2021. There he reaffirmed Germany's commitment to the strengthening of the European sovereignty and of the partnership between Germany and France.^{xlv}

Conclusions

In conclusion we can say that President Emmanuel Macron was only partly able to deliver all the reforms that he had promised in his 2017 presidential campaign and in the first few months of his time in office. During this quinquennat he was presented with several obstacles that prevented him from executing his initial plans satisfactorily. Although during the course of these five years he launched some reforms the results of which are yet to be seen neither in France nor in the European Union. But Emmanuel Macron's vision for France and for Europe goes beyond the end of his term. In his rhetoric he describes how the EU should look in 2024, and how the end of some political project will be in 2025, for instance.

Furthermore, he strongly believes that the EU should be the common framework for member states where they can all thrive. In order to preserve this common framework, he emphasises the followings: respect for common democratic values, the creation of a more protective single market. Now that from January 2022 France takes on the presidency of the Council of the European Union, he will have a great chance to enhance the implementation of his vision but also to convince his domestic electorate that he still has a lot to be achieved. In order to realise all his ambitions, it is crucial to build alliance within the EU, that is why he reached out to the Visegrád Group in a bid to win over their support in the upcoming European debates.

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