

Opinion – A Daunting Agenda for France's EU Presidency

Written by Alexander Brotman

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ALEXANDER BROTMAN, JAN 9 2022

As France assumes the rotating presidency of the European Union (EU) this month, there is a daunting list of agenda items for Paris to contend with. Omicron's wave may begin to recede shortly, but the battle to vaccinate and boost EU citizens remains a priority, with Macron taking a hardline stance against the unvaccinated. Simultaneously, regardless of whether Russia further invades Ukraine, this moment is one of the most serious tests of Europe's security architecture and NATO's defence posture since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Combined with ongoing tensions with Belarus over the migrant crisis on the Belarus-Poland border, and pivotal elections in France and Hungary in April, the next few months are likely to be as trying as ever for European unity.

Macron's ambitions for France's EU presidency matches the rhetoric that he and other EU leaders like former German Chancellor Angela Merkel have used over the past several years. Macron envisions a Europe that is 'powerful in the world, fully sovereign, and master of its destiny', one that embraces strategic autonomy and is less reliant on the United States. For Macron, the Biden administration's rapid withdrawal from Afghanistan, and announcement of the AUKUS pact between the US, UK, and Australia, has revealed a consistent unreliability from Washington that echoes the hasty decision-making of the Trump years. Within the bloc, the EU's economic power will remain significant with GDP growth of around 4.5% expected in 2022. However, Europe's destiny risks being determined by individual member states that view full sovereignty as returning core competencies from Brussels to national capitals. As the EU begins to emerge from Omicron, clashing conceptions of sovereignty and competing priorities within member states may hinder collective engagement.

The EU is often said to be at crisis or inflection points that will determine its future trajectory. The eurozone crisis, the migrant crisis of 2015-16, and the bloc's response to the COVID-19 pandemic have all been trying moments for the union. For France, this moment presents a unique combination of domestic and external pressures that will challenge both French politics and the EU's relations with its immediate neighbours, namely Russia. Domestically, the French presidential elections will occur in two rounds this April, with far-right candidates Eric Zemmour and Marine Le Pen grasping onto hot-button cultural issues over French national identity, immigration, and religion. Zemmour and Le Pen's rhetoric risks inciting violence and further dividing French citizens at a time when patience is wearing thin.

Macron's recent comments that he wants to 'piss off' the unvaccinated are unlikely to enlarge his political base and provides ample fodder for the far-right to paint him as elitist and domineering. Likewise, the uproar from the far-right over the placement of the EU flag under the Arc de Triomphe is one example of the identity battles that will be prominent and continue to be espoused by Zemmour and Le Pen.

In addition, after 16 years of Chancellor Merkel and a close German-Franco partnership between her and Macron, Germany now has a new coalition government led by Olaf Scholz of the Social Democrats. Scholz's coalition has made strong statements that align with Macron regarding Ukraine, Russian aggression, and the need for European unity and greater European sovereignty. However, the transition in German politics is an opportune moment for Vladimir Putin to test Berlin's ambitions, and the first summit between Scholz and Putin will be critical to gauge whether Putin views Scholz to be a formidable adversary and interlocutor. Thus, France is the dominant political player in Europe right now and the steady hand by default, with the potential for even weaker political legitimacy for

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Macron depending on the far-right’s showing in the April election.

The second election looming in Europe, concurrent to France’s presidential elections, will occur in Hungary. Hungary has proven to be a thorn in the EU’s side on many issues, most notably in relation to the rule of law and the bloc’s common migration policy. Should Viktor Orban win reelection, and despite his many differences with Brussels, Hungary is likely to remain an EU member state for some time, knowing the immense value Budapest has to reform the EU from within. Likewise, depending on the strength of the far-right vote in the French elections, Macron will need to deftly navigate Orban and his ruling Fidesz party’s place in crafting Europe’s destiny. ‘More Europe’ may be a hard sell for Macron after both the French and Hungarian elections, which may signal a deeper desire for more sovereignty and national control rather than grand designs for the future of Europe.

Macron is often presented in the media, most notably in Sophie Pedder’s biography of his first year in office, as a grand strategist with outsized, grandiose ambitions for Europe and France’s role in it. Nicknamed ‘Jupiter’, he is a tireless reformer whose greatest battles are often fought with the entrenched elements of the state that he manages. These elements include France’s powerful trade unions and the combined forces of the Yellow Vests movement that have since latched onto the COVID-19 debate over vaccine passports. Upon entering the Elysée Palace, Macron was fully aware that reforming France would be a challenge that would create many enemies for him. However, he views his leadership of France as a long arc that may have short-term negative effects in order to place France in a more competitive and dominant position in Europe in the long-term.

With the UK continuing to tussle with France and Brussels over the terms of its withdrawal from the EU, and Poland and Hungary engaged in rule of law and constitutional authority debates, Macron’s greatest challenge may be in just containing Europe rather than expanding its powers and capabilities. Thinking smaller may not come as easily to Macron, but for the duration of France’s EU presidency, the success of the union may be judged less on grandiosity and more on the competency and management of pre-existing disputes.

About the author:

Alexander Brotman is a political risk and intelligence analyst with a focus on EU politics and security developments. He has written for Global Risk Insights and Foreign Brief, two political risk publications, and has provided direct research support to a leading scholar of Russia and Eurasia in Washington. Alexander received his MSc. in International Relations from The University of Edinburgh. He is currently based in Washington DC.

He writes in a personal capacity and not with any professional affiliation.