



# French Policies toward Central Eastern Europe: Not a Foreign Policy Priority, but a Real Presence

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## French Policies toward Central Eastern Europe: Not a Foreign Policy Priority but a Real Presence

By Elsa Tulmets and David Cadier



## Summary

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The study maps the political, economic, and cultural relations between France and the Central Eastern European countries ten years after the EU's 2004 eastern enlargement. It shows that, although France has not officially or explicitly elevated the region to the status of a foreign policy priority, there is a real French presence in the region. As a general rule, France has been prioritizing the development of relations with the biggest Central Eastern European countries (and markets) and with the most francophone ones. The paper illustrates this by analyzing France's recent investment in its bilateral relationship with Poland. This relationship has witnessed significant developments—first and foremost in the field of defense and security—and bears great potential. The paper concludes by discussing what the ongoing Franco-Polish rapprochement means for the Weimar Triangle dynamic and for EU foreign policy, in particular in the context of the Ukraine crisis.

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# French Policies toward Central Eastern Europe: Not a Foreign Policy Priority but a Real Presence

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## Introduction

After the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, France reacted very cautiously to the political and economic changes in the east and insisted on setting a series of conditions to allow Central Eastern European countries (CEECs) to join the European Union. For several years, French companies were also reluctant to invest in CEECs—countries that at the time had the same “country investment risk” as African countries. Even after the CEECs were set to become member states of the EU, political relations remained underdeveloped and, in fact, somewhat deteriorated at the time of the Iraq crisis. However, the rapid reform course set down by the CEECs themselves managed to convince French actors of the importance of this region composed of ten EU member states. These states joined the EU in 2004.

Ten years after the EU’s eastern enlargement, has Paris integrated these new actors into its European policy? Is the recent endeavor to reinvigorate and upgrade bilateral ties with these countries, promoted by conservative as well as socialist presidents, a lasting strategy? What are the motivations behind it? After reviewing the history of relations between France and the CEECs in the 1990s and 2000s, the analysis will focus on Franco-Polish relations, which have recently experienced substantial developments not only in the field of defense and with regard to EU foreign policy but also in other areas as well.

## France’s Long Road toward Integrating the CEE Region into Its Foreign Policy

### 1) A Paternalistic Approach after the Fall of the Berlin Wall

#### *Relations before the end of the Cold War*

During the Cold War, relations between France and the CEECs were reduced to a minimum. There was some contact with CEE populations, as some students managed to study in France and as some people migrated to France both temporarily and permanently, especially from Poland after the imposition of martial law in 1981. But economic ties were marginal. At the end of the 1980s, at the time of perestroika when some economic reforms were initiated in Hungary and Poland, France started to develop initiatives aimed at supporting these reforms. Some meetings were also organized with oppositional movements, like the famous meeting between President François Mitterrand and Czechoslovak dissidents—including Václav Havel—at the French embassy in Prague, and the French president’s visits in June 1989 to key Polish cities like Warsaw but also Gdańsk—the city where the Solidarność movement started.<sup>1</sup> In June 1989, a few months before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the G7 Arche summit of Paris decided to launch a European program called PHARE—Pologne,

Hongrie, Aide à la Restructuration Economique (Poland, Hungary, aid for economic restructuring)—designed to offer concrete help to the reforms initiated in these two countries. This program went on to become the key EU assistance program for all CEECs.

#### *The key role of aid policy in the enlargement context*

While France had played a major role in organizing some assistance for economic restructuring in the CEECs in June 1989 through PHARE, it later proved more reluctant to pursue the path of an enlargement of the European community, as proposed and mainly supported by the German government. In 1992, President Mitterrand clearly stated that negotiations could not open up unless concrete conditions were defined at the EU level. The result of the French-German compromise was the definition of the “Copenhagen criteria” of 1993: the candidates would have to respect political, economic, and legislative conditions and adopt the whole EU *acquis communautaire* before acceding to the EU.<sup>2</sup>

In parallel to PHARE, the French government under Mitterrand defined a small assistance mission, called Miceco, which only lasted from 1991 to 1993. Some foundations were also created, like the Fondation France-Pologne and the Fondation France-Hongrie, which aimed at fostering contacts and exchanges at the bilateral level in supporting projects and giving study grants to students. In the eyes of the CEECs, however, these efforts did not assuage the strong impression made by France’s initial wariness—not only of German reunification but also of the EU integration of countries that had been seen as pro-German before the Iron Curtain fell over Eastern Europe.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Limited economic relations*

Economic relations between France and the CEECs took time to develop. It is surprising to note that, for several years (and at least until the change of government in France in 1995), the CEECs’ investment risk was evaluated as being equivalent to those of some African countries.<sup>4</sup> Many French companies have nonetheless invested

in CEECs, mainly in the countries with the biggest markets—Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic—but also in Romania and Slovenia. In 2004, at the time of the CEECs’ EU accession, French investment was the third largest (about 6 percent), after German (25 percent) and Italian (10 percent) investment.<sup>5</sup> Investment took off once the CEECs had genuine EU accession perspectives. Between 1993 and 2004, for example, France invested around 2.73 billion euros in the Czech Republic, and in 2004 it was the fourth major investor after Germany, the Netherlands, and Austria—mainly in the fields of the auto industry (Peugeot-Citroën, PSA), banking sector (Société Générale), water and the environment (Vivendi/Veolia), glass (St Gobain), transportation (Eurovia, Renault), dairy products (Danone), and construction (Lafarge). Between 2000 and 2005, France even held first place in terms of investment in Poland, mainly investing in the fields of telecommunication (France Télécom, Vivendi), food services (Carrefour, Auchan, Casino), electricity (Electricité de France), banking (Crédit Agricole), construction (Lafarge), electrical engineering (Thomson Multi-Média), and tourism (Accor).<sup>6</sup> Overall, investment has mainly been motivated by geographical proximity, positive political and economic changes, good working qualifications, and infrastructure.

#### *An active cultural policy*

Cultural relations have been traditionally rather good between France and the CEECs. France has pursued a very active cultural policy, opening French institutes (Instituts français) and schools in almost all capital cities from the beginning of the 1990s onward. Language courses as well as study and research grants are offered, film and music festivals are organized, and prominent French thinkers are invited speak in the countries’ most important universities. The French Civilization Center at the University of Warsaw has roots that go back to the 1950s, and a Czech-French research center in social sciences (Centre français de recherche en sciences sociales, or CEFRES) was established in 1991 in Prague. In general, academic cooperation between French and CEEC research institutions is quite active.

## 2) Establishing More Balanced Relations after Accession to NATO and the EU?

One would have expected French policies toward the CEECs to be reevaluated after these countries joined NATO (between 1999 and 2004) and the EU (in 2004 and 2009). This was certainly the case within official discourse. In practice, however, French politicians continued to devote little attention—and to attach little importance—to the EU's eastern members. Recent developments, however, suggest that a shift of perceptions might be taking place among French policymakers, at least as far as the biggest newer member states are concerned.

### *The war in Iraq as a context for the deterioration of bilateral relations*

The first CEECs to join NATO—Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary—were actively engaged in supporting US and NATO activities on European soil and in participating in some of NATO's missions abroad after they had joined the alliance. For example, they played a role as facilitators during the Kosovo intervention of 1999. Hungary allowed the use of its military bases and opened up its airspace to overflights. At the time of the US operation in Iraq, the three countries decided, after intense internal debates, to support the intervention. Politicians from the region—many of them previous dissidents—either signed the “Letter of the Eight” or the “Vilnius letter,” both of which were meant to demonstrate explicit support for US actions and thus took a clear stance against Franco-German opposition to the intervention. This move on the part of the CEECs, who had in the meantime become members of the EU, prompted an admonition from President Jacques Chirac: “You missed a great opportunity to remain quiet.” The oft-quoted comment left its mark on CEEC capitals, where Chirac's annoyance was interpreted as paternalistic and pejorative. More profoundly, it was also the mark of different CEE foreign policy orientations, of different strategic cultures and of different interpretations of history.<sup>7</sup>

### *Proposing strategic partnerships*

When Nicolas Sarkozy (a politician with partly Hungarian origins) took up the French presidency in 2007, he tried to repair not only the damage caused by Chirac's quip but also the negative image of France that had spread throughout Central Europe after President François Mitterrand initially opposed EU enlargement.<sup>8</sup> In a speech given in his father's country, Hungary, he countered the idea of a Europe divided into “old and new” and “big and small” EU countries—deliberately debunking language that US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had used in 2003, which seemed to embody the US understanding of Europe at the time.<sup>9</sup> To prove France's openness to the concerns of “new” member states, Sarkozy proposed the negotiation of “privileged” partnerships—or Strategic Partnerships—with detailed “Action Plans” with seven countries, in particular in the fields of energy, environment, security, immigration, education, and culture. One such partnership was signed with the Czech Republic on June 16, 2008. In May 2008, Sarkozy also announced in Poland that the French market would be open to the Eastern partners almost a year ahead of schedule.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, however, the “new” member states remained sensitive to certain mistakes that undermined the credibility of these valuable steps. These included the cancellation of state visits to the Baltic states in favor of a trip to Moscow. Similarly, there has been no French will to organize official visits at the highest level in Slovakia since the country's independence. Bilateral relations with Romania, traditionally good on the cultural level, have been fraught on the political level by the issue of Roma population mobility and related negotiations on accession to the Schengen Area. This was also the case with Bulgaria. Relations with Hungary have been very tense since the arrival to power of Viktor Orbán in 2010 and his government's efforts to push through controversial constitutional reforms. For many analysts, these reforms go against both French economic interests and fundamental EU values.<sup>11</sup>



With the victory of the French Socialist Party in 2012, President François Hollande and Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius announced that relations with the CEECs would be relaunched, particularly in the economic domain. Strategic Partnerships have since been renegotiated, and action plans have been concluded with all CEECs except Estonia.<sup>12</sup> Partnerships with Slovakia and Poland were signed on October 29, 2013 and November 29, 2013, respectively, and they define priorities at all sectoral levels. Several official visits have also been organized with the aim of reinforcing bilateral cooperation: Hollande went to Slovakia in November 2013; an “excellent” dialogue was developed with the Baltic states on Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP); there have been official Hungarian visits like that of Foreign Minister János Martonyi to France in early 2013 (although there have been no reciprocal visits since 2010 for political reasons). Martonyi’s visit enabled France to secure Hungarian support for the French military operation in Mali and for the launch of the EU Training Mission (EUTM) there.<sup>13</sup>

*EU Council presidencies as windows of opportunity for reinforcing bilateral relations*

Paris and Prague did not hide their divergent views on a number of issues linked to their successive presidencies of the EU Council (in 2008 and 2009, respectively), and the transition was marked by tensions.<sup>14</sup> The same was true for France and Hungary during Hungary’s 2011 Council presidency, in the aftermath of which Alain Juppé declared, “there is a problem with Hungary.”<sup>15</sup> French cooperation with Slovenia, Poland, and Lithuania, on the other hand, seems to have been smoother in terms of preparation for those countries’ respective council presidencies (2008, 2011, and 2013). Two examples of the political divergences between French and eastern European views of EU foreign policy are the fact that Mirek Topolánek, the Czech prime minister, asked his deputy prime minister for European affairs, Alexandr Vondra, to represent him at the French-led EU summit on the Union for the Mediterranean (July 13, 2008), followed by Sarkozy’s own refusal to attend the Czech-led EU summit on the Eastern Partnership (May 7, 2009).<sup>16</sup> In order to show a more constructive approach

than their conservative predecessors, the Socialist government decided that Hollande would personally attend the Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit in November 2013, together with Laurent Fabius and Thierry Repentin, the deputy minister for European affairs—whereas only the French prime minister had attended the Prague Summit in 2009. One has also to mention that CEECs, especially the Baltic States, have actively participated in the French-led mission in Mali.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, the preparation of the council presidencies has made these countries work more closely than ever. This has taken place through regular bilateral meetings, mainly at the ministerial and administrative levels. For every EU presidency held by a CEEC, France has been very engaged in training diplomats and civil servants, who have benefited not only from French language courses with the support of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) but also from the institutional coordination of EU issues within the framework of programs organized by the École Nationale d’Administration (ENA) and other French institutions.<sup>18</sup> Numerous joint seminars and consultations took place among civil servants from different ministries, and secondments (i.e. exchanges) were organized for diplomats, which have at last made it possible for France and the CEECs to work together more closely.<sup>19</sup>

Cooperation on EU presidencies has also had a positive effect in terms of economic and cultural cooperation. In the case of the Czech Republic, it can be noted that bilateral trade and economic relations experienced renewed dynamism from 2007 on. The French-Czech-Swedish council presidency trio, as well as fulfillment of the Action Plan of the Franco-Czech Strategic Partnership, created a window for enhanced economic cooperation.<sup>20</sup> Certainly the “Czech-French Economic Year” (July 2008–June 2009) contributed to enhancing lasting cooperation in various economic sectors, as it involved all possible actors—from the public spheres of the chambers of commerce, embassies, and regions to the private sphere of the firms themselves. No less than thirty bilateral events—from the launch of the “first Czech-French technological forum” to the “Journées économiques

tchèques” in France in October 2008, and from the exchange of interns in French and Czech companies to the development of clusters (pôles de compétitivité)—contributed to intensifying cooperation on key topics like industry and technology, transportation and infrastructure, agriculture, support to small and medium-size companies, and the like.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, these constructive steps have been affected by a major Czech decision that has alienated France, namely the rebuttal in 2012 of a bid by the French conglomerate Areva to modernize the Temelín Nuclear Power Station in Western Bohemia.<sup>22</sup>

As far as cultural relations are concerned, a close look at the joint cultural programs proposed by the CEECs and France indicate that these relations have also intensified during respective EU CEEC presidencies,<sup>23</sup> although these institutions, as well as academic ones like the French-Czech research center CEFRES, have seen major cuts within the context of budgetary reforms of French diplomacy.

## The Development of a Special Relationship with Poland

The salient novelty and most important component of France’s policies toward the CEECs clearly concern Poland. Since Hollande’s accession to power, Paris has sought to invest in its bilateral relationship with Warsaw, and this relationship has in fact undergone significant developments over the last two years. The level and frequency of political consultations and official visits has clearly intensified. Since his election in May 2012, Hollande has travelled three times to Warsaw. On the Polish side, President Bronisław Komorowski made a state visit to France in May 2013—the first visit by a Polish president since 2000—and Radosław Sikorski, the Polish foreign minister, was invited to attend the annual ambassadors’ conference in France in August 2013. The Franco-Polish rapprochement has been made possible by the evolution of the regional context and necessary with regard to the two actors’ EU strategies.

### 1) Political Engagement in an Evolving Regional Context

France’s bilateral relations with Poland remained underdeveloped in the 2000s, perhaps even less developed than France’s relations with other CEECs. Dealings were often marked by mutual distrust. Poland was both the biggest and the most Atlanticist of the EU’s new member states—in a context where the 2004 enlargement had been met with skepticism among French governing elites and where the polarization over the US intervention in Iraq served as a defining and structuring moment for European foreign policy.<sup>24</sup> The erosion of this polarization, Poland’s “European turn,” and France’s “reconciliation with Atlanticism” brought about a much more favorable context in the late 2000s, however. Poland, pushed by external as well as domestic factors (from the re-balancing of US foreign policy priorities away from Europe to the economic modernization agenda of the Polish Centre-Right government that was elected in 2007), has been striving to consolidate its position in the EU.<sup>25</sup> Facilitated by the country’s steady economic growth, this investment materialized in the development of a niche of specialization, such as the Eastern Partnership, but also more broadly in a will to install the country at the core of European integration. Both of these goals require recognition from—and constructive relations with—the other big member states. For its part, France has also been concerned by the prospect of US disengagement—though not from European but from international politics. In response, it has sought to reinforce its strategic ties with Washington and to act on its call to see Europe take a greater share of the international security burden. This has translated into a greater disposition toward interventions, in US-led “coalitions of the able and willing” or by itself, both of which require generating support and contributions from other EU member states.<sup>26</sup>

The convergence of France’s and Poland’s parallel foreign policy evolutions will open the way for the enhancement of a bilateral political relationship that, in light of the historical and cultural ties uniting the two countries, had been at an abnormal low. The signing of a Franco-Polish Strategic Partnership in 2008 represented a first step in this direc-

tion. Missed opportunities and tensions around specific dossiers under the Sarkozy presidency meant, however, that rapprochement was slow to take off. The main source of discord revolved around European economic governance and Paris's resolve to limit new integration initiatives to the Eurozone core, which was de facto excluding Poland. Other points of divergence included the share of the cohesion policy in the new EU budget, the East-South rivalry in the allocation of the resources of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP),<sup>27</sup> and Paris's disappointment at the lack of support—whether political or military—for military intervention in Libya by most EU member states, including Poland.

The atmosphere changed with the election of a new French president in May 2012, which created new momentum. The new administration came to office with the conscious will and deliberate strategy to invest in the bilateral relationship with Poland. François Hollande had in fact visited Warsaw as a presidential candidate. Most importantly, Paris made concrete gestures toward Poland, notably signaling a greater willingness to associate non-Eurozone members in discussions about the common currency and amending its stance on the cohesion policy in the EU budget negotiation.<sup>28</sup> The latter allows Poland to continue to be an important beneficiary of this policy in the 2014–2020 budget framework, an outcome for which Warsaw has been grateful and that has contributed to bettering relations between the two countries.<sup>29</sup>

The evolution of the EU context made such rapprochement not only possible but also necessary. While Sarkozy had worked in close coordination with Germany during the first years of the Eurozone crisis, Hollande sought to distance himself from Germany's push for austerity policies. To advance its growth agenda as an alternative, to harness support for its proposals on further integration in the Eurozone and on the introduction of solidarity mechanisms, but also, more profoundly, to consolidate its leadership potential within an increasingly inter-governmental EU, France was keen to forge new partnerships. Beyond the real-

ization that Poland is emerging in its own right as an important player in EU politics, a closer bilateral relationship with Warsaw is serving several objectives in this context. Firstly, Paris wishes to reach out more to the CEE member states—and Poland, as an informal leader of this group, can help generate support for French proposals among them. Secondly, Poland can serve as a key partner in generating leadership at the EU level on issues where Germany is less active (e.g. common security and defense) and thus where the “Franco-German motor” cannot be activated.<sup>30</sup> Thirdly, enhancing bilateral ties with Poland can, in fact, also be a way for France to add greater weight to the French side of the Franco-German tandem, since Berlin has been enjoying privileged bonds with Central European countries. As for Poland, a rapprochement with Paris is seen as a means to increase its clout in the EU and to be recognized as one of the central payers. As one Polish diplomat put it, “we expect France to help us be in the first core of EU integration.”<sup>31</sup> It also represents an indirect way for Poland to get closer to Germany, which has been at the heart of its EU and foreign policy strategies over the last years.<sup>32</sup> In other words, the German variable is an important one in the new Franco-Polish equation, although the two actors do not attribute the same functions to it.

Concretely, the Franco-Polish rapprochement has taken the form of several initiatives. On November 29, 2013, Hollande travelled to Warsaw with several French ministers (of defense, external trade, agriculture, ecology & energy, and European affairs, among others) to attend the Franco-Polish inter-governmental summit, a series of high-level consultations that the authorities of the two countries vowed to hold annually. On this occasion, the two governments signed a new Strategic Partnership, essentially pledging to better coordinate their positions with the EU and providing a detailed roadmap on how and where to deepen their bilateral cooperation. Of the several issue areas identified, security and defense is certainly the one domain around which the Franco-Polish rapprochement is gathering steam.

## 2) Partnerships and Potentials in Security and Defense

As with other areas of their bilateral relationship, the Franco-Polish cooperation in the field of security and defense has long been characterized by divergent preferences, discrepant initiatives, and missed opportunities. It has, however, recently developed around three pillars: development of CSDP; interoperability within NATO; and the defense industry.

Throughout most of the 2000s, France has been the main advocate for the development of European defense through the CSDP framework, while Poland remained very wary of an initiative that it perceived as presenting the risk of marginalizing the US from European security.<sup>33</sup> In the framework of the foreign policy adjustment described above, however, Poland has “taken a U-turn” on CSDP and increasingly sees it as an opportunity both to consolidate its position within the EU and to maximize its security guarantees. Thus, in the run-up to its 2011 EU council presidency, Poland made a number of proposals to re-invigorate EU defense cooperation, including some it had opposed in the past, such as the prospect of a permanent EU military headquarters.<sup>34</sup>

As France shared this overall objective and had pushed for some of these very initiatives in the past, one would have expected Poland’s newfound enthusiasm for CSDP to lead to a deeper cooperation between the two countries. It came, however, at a moment when France’s own enthusiasm about the possibilities and prospects of European defense seemed to be eroding. The Lancaster House Treaty concluded with Great Britain in 2010, while certainly not incompatible with a strong CSDP, nonetheless indicated France’s readiness to consider, if not to favor, other defense cooperation formats. The Libya intervention not only confirmed the strength of these bilateral strategic ties but also nurtured disappointment in Paris with regard to other European member states who did not support the operation.<sup>35</sup> The Polish government refused to join NATO’s deployment; its core national interests were not at stake, and it was reluctant in an election year to face public opinion

widely opposed to the intervention. Polish diplomats, moreover, have privately deplored the lack of transparency and consultations surrounding the operation.<sup>36</sup> Prime Minister Donald Tusk publicly questioned the intent of France and the UK in Libya, which contributed to straining relations with Paris.<sup>37</sup>

Here, too, Hollande’s election helped create a new momentum. In the new 2013 Strategic Partnership agreement, the two states pledged to work together to “increase the visibility, the efficiency and the political role of the CSDP.”<sup>38</sup> At a time when none of the EU’s other big member states seem committed to such a goal, the Franco-Polish partnership has indeed an important role to play, and the potential to do so. It is true that divergences on the overarching purpose of the CSDP and on the scale and target zone of its deployments have not been fully reconciled. France conceives of the CSDP as an instrument for projecting force, while Poland sees it more as an integration mechanism and as a framework for European capacity development. The priorities and expectations with regard to out-of-area operations sometimes differ, too; the contribution of 19 Polish trainers to the CSDP mission in Mali (EUTM) is seen by Warsaw as a significant gesture toward France (since Poland has no interests in the region), while Paris perceives it as meager (since France is bearing most of the costs of the operation).<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, there is a convergence and increased cooperation between the two countries on the issue of development and mutualization of capabilities (“Smart Defense” and “Pooling and Sharing”). A “building blocks” approach on these matters, supported by both France and Poland, appears today as one of the few available paths to develop CSDP. It was, in fact, one of the few areas where the 2013 European Council on Defense made concrete progress.<sup>40</sup>

The new dynamic in defense cooperation between France and Poland is maybe even more salient—and potentially more significant—outside of CSDP. Both countries are committed to increasing inter-operability of European armed forces, particularly within NATO. They were, for instance, the two main contributors to NATO’s Steadfast Jazz, a large-scale military exercise con-



ducted in November 2013 in Poland and in the Baltic States.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the fact that Paris sent 1,200 military personnel to take part in this exercise (compared to the 120 participants sent by Washington and 55 from Berlin) probably constitutes the most significant development in Franco-Polish strategic relations in recent years. It does not simply demonstrate the commitment of France and Poland to NATO's operational capacity and to the inter-operability of European armed forces. It is also highly symbolic in the sense that the region of deployment and the scenario of the exercise clearly related to the security interests of the CEECs. In this regard, Warsaw received it as a strong and positive signal.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, the defense industry is another area where Franco-Polish ties have the potential to develop further. Poland is engaged in large-scale plans of modernization of its armed forces by 2022. This prospect makes the country an important strategic partner for Paris, as does its political support for CSDP and its operational capacity within NATO.<sup>43</sup> The modernization plans for the Polish army represent important contract opportunities for French armament firms but also opportunities for joint industrial projects between the two countries.

In this regard, the tender for the construction of Poland's missile defense system appears particularly significant. For this project, a national endeavor separate from the US missile defense system (in which Poland will also take part), Warsaw will be choosing between four bidders: the American firm Raytheon, a consortium led by the American company Lockheed Martin, the Israeli group Rafael, and a consortium of the French company Thales, the Polish Defense Holding, and the European group MBDA.<sup>44</sup> The decision, which is expected before the end of the year, will be highly symbolic and potentially revelatory of Poland's defense orientation; regardless of its price and regardless of technical considerations, the American offer is often seen in Warsaw as representing greater security guarantees. In this sense, the recent crisis in Ukraine is likely to increase Poland's demand for such guarantees and might well contribute to tipping the balance toward this American offer.

### 3) Russia, the Ukraine Crisis, and the Weimar Triangle

While defense is certainly the most prominent area, it is not the only domain in which France and Poland have sought to develop their bilateral cooperation and, where possible, coordinate their positions at the EU level. The Strategic Partnership agreement identifies a number of other domains such as trade, agriculture, industry, social policies, justice, culture, energy, and climate change. The latter two in particular have seen increased exchanges. Poland's endeavor to diversify its energy mix—and, in particular, its plan to build its first nuclear plant by 2024 (and a second by 2035)—represents opportunities for French investments and expertise.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, France and Poland have attempted to coordinate their respective presidencies of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (2013 and 2015 respectively).

Overall, while the Strategic Partnership agreement provides a roadmap for deeper cooperation, it remains largely declaratory at this stage. The level of political and strategic consultations has undeniably increased and intensified, but putting flesh on the bone of the Franco-Polish partnership will depend on political will, on concrete projects, and on external events. In that sense, the recent developments in and around Ukraine mean that the question of EU policies toward Russia and the Eastern Neighborhood is likely to emerge as an important stress test for the Franco-Polish rapprochement.

The topic of EU-Russia relations is only mentioned briefly and in rather vague terms in the Strategic Partnership agreement. France and Poland vow there to work together toward the elaboration of a "coherent and united" European policy, one that "take[s] into account the interests of the Union."<sup>46</sup> This general wording is meant in fact to mask substantial divergences on Russia. Surely their positions are not as antagonistic as they might have been in the last decade. Poland has adopted a much less confrontational stance toward Russia in the EU since the late 2000s, and the two most recent French presidents have been more critical of Vladimir Putin's regime than Chirac was. Yet the

fact remains that, for understandable historical and geopolitical reasons, the evaluations in Warsaw and Paris of the threat posed by Russia to European security and the views on the means to address it are largely discrepant.

It remains to be seen whether the Ukraine crisis will contribute to crystallize, deepen, or narrow these divergences. On the one hand, the recent events are certainly likely to increase Poland's sensitivity toward Russia and to lead it to adopt a tougher stance within the EU and within NATO. In fact, Warsaw's aforementioned change of attitude on Russia was not the result of a re-evaluation of its security interests or of the potential threat posed by Russia but came from a change of tactic: adopting a more constructive stance on Russia was perceived as a means of getting closer to Germany and consolidating Poland's position within the EU.<sup>47</sup> (These goals were in themselves partly perceived as additional security guarantees, as emphasized above). Thus, a shift in Russia's policies is likely to bring a new amendment of this tactic; since the Ukraine crisis, Poland has been forcefully requesting the deployment of NATO troops on its soil. (The Foreign Minister demanded "two heavy brigades" in early April).<sup>48</sup>

On the other hand, the nature and magnitude of the crisis could also lead France to adjust its own position on Russia. While the Eastern Neighborhood had not been among its top priorities until now, Paris has been particularly active on the Ukraine crisis. Quite tellingly, this has included demonstrating solidarity with Poland's security concerns and those of the Baltic states: France sent four fighter jets within the framework of the enhanced NATO air policing mission launched over these countries in late April 2014.<sup>49</sup> More generally, Paris has taken an active role in coordinating the EU response, notably within the framework of the Weimar Triangle. The question lingers, however, of whether this should be read as a crisis-management policy or whether it might inaugurate a more structured attention toward the Eastern Neighborhood. In any case, France and Poland are likely to remain at odds on some of the regional dossiers, such as the question of providing Ukraine with an EU membership perspective.

While the events in Ukraine have the potential to strain Franco-Polish relations by exposing divergences on Russia, it could also be argued that these relations might benefit from the ongoing consolidation of the Weimar Triangle and from the reinforcement of its role in EU external relations. The Weimar format seems indeed to have been given a new lease on life since last fall's German elections and in the context of the Ukraine crisis. The foreign ministers of the three countries conducted a mediation mission in Kiev on February 20-21 and released two common statements on the situation in the country (on February 28 and March 31, 2014).

Indeed, the Weimar Triangle appears as a promising format, one that could give an impulse to leadership on EU-Russia relations if the three countries manage to coordinate in spite of their divergences. Germany's is probably the most potent European voice in Moscow; France has both a long history of diplomatic interaction with Russia and the ability to act as informal leader of southern EU member states; Poland has both recognized expertise on the Eastern Neighborhood and the ability to act as an informal leader of the CEE member states. An enhanced role for the Weimar Triangle is also made possible by the Franco-Polish rapprochement and might in turn contribute to reinforcing this dynamic. This format has long been the forum for coordinating two strong bilateral relationships (Franco-German and Germano-Polish) rather than a genuine triumvirate: by consolidating the third "face" of the Weimar Triangle, the development of France's bilateral relationship with Poland can strengthen the format's foundations and contribute to giving it new momentum and new possibilities in providing leadership in EU external relations.

## Conclusion

Only the future will tell whether President Hollande's policy toward the region will be sustained and whether it will bear fruit. In this regard, the recent investment in the relationship with Poland is particularly significant and potentially indicative. France is now thoroughly integrating Poland into its EU strategy and looks to develop partner-

ships in certain areas. Security and defense is one area that has seen major and potentially long-term developments, such as the joint commitment to NATO's Exercise Steadfast Jazz and the prospects in terms of arms industry contracts and cooperation. The Ukraine crisis certainly represents a stress test for the Franco-Polish rapprochement, as it has the potential to exacerbate divergences on Russia and the Eastern Neighborhood. So far, France and Poland have managed to pass the test, cooperating

in particular on this dossier within the framework of the Weimar Triangle. The latter can both contribute to reinforce and be reinforced by a beefed-up Franco-Polish partnership. France should seek to activate this format more and potentially attempt to establish links with the Visegrad Group as a whole in order to carry forward and give substance to its nascent policy of engagement in Central Europe.

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## Notes

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- 12 Relations between France and Estonia nonetheless remain good, as confirmed by an interview conducted by one of the authors with the French ambassador to Estonia (Tallinn, December 2013) and at the French MFA (Paris, March 2014). See also Kristenpruun Sigrid, "L'Estonie en France: La dimension culturelle de la diplomatie publique," in *Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Yearbook 2012* (Tallinn, 2012), pp. 56–66.
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- 36 Interviews at the Polish MFA, Warsaw, May 2013.
- 37 O’Donnell, 2012 (see note 34).
- 38 Partenariat stratégique franco-polonais: program de coopération, Warsaw, November 29, 2013. Available at <<http://www.ambafrance-pl.org/>>.
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- 40 Nick Witney, “Despite the Brits, a modest defence summit success,” ECFR, December 22, 2013.
- 41 Poland and France contributed together more than one third of the troops for this exercise involving 28 Alliance members and three partner countries.
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