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'A Sovereign Europe'? Strategic Use of Discourse at the Service of French Economic Interests in EU Politics (2017–2022)

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Abstract

The 'practice turn' in European Union (EU) studies has shown that everyday actions, notably discursive practices, are consequential for producing European integration. Yet, an important development has been overlooked by scholars: the emergence of a 'European sovereignty' discourse in EU politics. Since President Emmanuel Macron's Sorbonne speech in September 2017, the EU policy of the French government has been structured around the affirmed objective of building 'European sovereignty'. It supposes that the EU should become more geopolitical and not shy away from defending its own interests in an increasingly disorderly and hostile world. This article enquires into the objectives that President Macron and the French government have sought to realise by introducing this discourse into EU politics. We argue that 'European sovereignty' is a discursive practice that instrumentalises security threats to the EU in order to legitimise France's economic policy objectives, most notably the reform of EU competition policy. Our findings derive not only from publicly available documents and speeches but also 72 semi-directed interviews.

Keywords: European Union; France; sovereignty; practice turn; discourse; industrial policy

Introduction

Since his Sorbonne speech in September 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron has consistently advocated for what he has termed 'European sovereignty'. He argues that only 'Europe (can) ensure real sovereignty, meaning (the) capacity to exist in the contemporary world and defend our interests and values' (Macron 2017b). Accordingly, in a world increasingly characterised by the rivalry of two continent-sized powers (the United States and China), European countries would need to pursue integration in order to measure up. Although seemingly intuitive, Macron has argued that this preoccupation with power politics had long been absent in the European Union (EU). Accustomed to live in a world of 'trade and safe alliances', the EU allegedly had believed in the 'End of History' (Macron 2019).

At least discursively, the notion of 'European sovereignty' has been quite successful. From the President of the European Commission Jean Claude Juncker to the former German Finance Minister and current Chancellor Olaf Scholz, many EU-level policy-makers referred themselves to Macron's discourse and appropriated 'European sovereignty' in the period following his Sorbonne speech (Juncker 2018; Scholz 2018). To be sure, the controversies surrounding the French discourse have not disappeared. The appearance of terms such as 'open strategic autonomy' further indicate that actors opposed to the 'European sovereignty' discourse can find creative ways to subvert it (Schmitz and Seidl 2022).

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Nonetheless, the need for a more ‘sovereign Europe’ became sufficiently engrained in EU official discourse to feature in successive state of the Union speeches by Commission presidents’ and even make its way into European Council Conclusions (European Council 2020a, 2020b, 2021) and the March 2022 Versailles declaration (European Council 2022).

Interestingly, the ‘European sovereignty’ discourse has remained peripheral in recent theoretical debates on conflicts of sovereignty within the EU. Brack et al. (2019) have argued that, despite the invocation of ‘European sovereignty’ by Emmanuel Macron and others, ‘the notion of supranational sovereignty has not been theorized and remains a political taboo’ (p. 824). Nicolas Jabko similarly noted that Macron’s ‘very Habermasian call for a European sovereignty has made little progress’. At the end of the day, ‘the political vibrancy of sovereignty still primarily operates at the national level’ and ‘it may be premature to expect the idea of a European sovereignty to resonate quite the same way and to produce major changes in sovereignty practices’ (Jabko 2020, p. 164). This has led scholars to conclude that whilst ‘Emmanuel Macron has made much of European sovereignty’, what he really means is ‘European strategic autonomy in areas such as defence and digital technology’ (Bickerton et al. 2022). Even in an area like trade policy, where it was used on multiple occasions, the ‘European sovereignty’ discourse is uninvolved with sovereignty conflicts (Crespy and Rone 2022). In sum, the discursive practice of ‘European sovereignty’ does not seem to have much relevance for the broader ‘sovereignty games’ in the EU (Adler-Nissen and Gammeltoft-Hansen 2008). Despite its ubiquity at the political level, the term has no legal basis and ‘remains taboo in the mouth of jurists’.¹

This dissociation between ‘European sovereignty’ and the conventional meaning of sovereignty understood as ‘a solid claim to the ultimate ordering of power that constitutes the polity’ only adds to the enigma surrounding this discourse (Adler-Nissen and Gammeltoft-Hansen 2008, p. 7). If ‘European sovereignty’ is so elusive, why have the French government and president Macron been so insistently advocating for it? Our demonstration proceeds in three parts. First, we place the ‘European sovereignty’ discourse within the broader context of the practice turn in EU studies. The analyst has much to gain by paying attention to everyday practices that may seem trivial at first sight. Second, we present our argument. The invocation of ‘European sovereignty’ is best understood as a discursive practice that uses security threats to legitimise an agenda grounded in France’s economic interests, most notably the reform of EU competition policy. The third and final part illustrates our argument through the detailed examination of four major proposals that derive from the Sorbonne speech: the ‘refondation démocratique’ of the EU, the creation of a ‘common strategic culture’, the emergence of ‘European champions’ in high-tech industries and the implementation of a ‘Eurozone budget’.

I. ‘European Sovereignty’ and the Practice Turn

In the last decade, the study of the EU and more generally of international relations has witnessed a practice turn (Adler-Nissen 2016). Practices are defined by Adler and Pouliot as ‘socially meaningful patterns of action which give consistency (if not permanence) to social arrangements’ as diverse as ‘marking a linear territorial boundary, deterring with

¹Interview with European Court of Justice judge, country non-disclosed, via phone, 4 November 2022

nuclear weapons, or finance trading' (Adler and Pouliot 2011, p. 6). Simply put, 'it is the unfolding of everyday practices that produces the bigger phenomena and social realities that we know of' (Pouliot 2016, p. 50). In the specific context of the EU, seemingly trivial quarrels about terminology are grounded in and have influence over major policy debates. As a lobbyist and former Commission official puts it, 'once you insert your word in an official document, it is the start of mainstreaming, it becomes a virus and spreads'.² Whilst the practice turn is contrasted with rational choice theory, an interpretive account of interest-based action is compatible with this research framework. Although interests retain their driving force, they are not deployed in a void but rather within a web of practices that exists prior to them (Pouliot 2020, pp. 748–751). Our primary focus is on how actors purposefully re-create existing practices in line with their interests. This article is thus interested in a specific discursive practice deployed by president Macron and more broadly by French government officials: 'European sovereignty'.

The analyst who examines discourse may be tempted to engage in an exclusively textual analysis. International practice theory, on the other hand, contextualises discourse within the material world (Neumann 2002, p. 628). Like other forms of practice, discourse is used by actors to change existing social arrangements in line with their interests. The methodological implication is that the analyst should not focus on what the discourse 'means' but rather what it 'does' (Austin 1962). 'European sovereignty' has been presented as an all-encompassing political concept. This could mean that the French government is trying to reconfigure the EU polity as a whole. A more cynical observer would view this as a sign of its malleability and lack of substance. We will show that neither of these interpretations are true. Far from being devoid of substance, the 'European sovereignty' discourse is at the service of very concrete policy objectives. That said, these objectives concern a smaller (albeit still large) area of EU politics and are much less novel than what Macron suggests. They are about the EU-level 'upload' of France's dirigiste variety of capitalism (Börzel 2002).

The claims of this article are demonstrated through examining four specific proposals that Emmanuel Macron formulated during his 2017 Sorbonne speech on 'European sovereignty': the '*refondation démocratique*' of the EU, a 'common strategic culture', 'European champions' and a Eurozone budget. Although taken from a single speech, these four proposals cover swaths of EU politics extensive enough to be taken as representative. Furthermore, the Sorbonne speech is widely considered as the instance where Macron propelled the 'European sovereignty' into EU politics. Tracing the four proposals throughout the first 5 years of Macron's presidency, we show that the 'European sovereignty' discourse has consistently been used to legitimise and advance EU policies that are compatible with French dirigisme. In areas with no direct relevance with dirigisme on the other hand, Macron and the French government left the 'European sovereignty' discourse vague and unsubstantive. In order to contextualise each of these proposals within the policy process, this article uses both primary and secondary sources. Whilst we made extensive use of scientific articles, government documents, parliamentary reports and press coverage, our prime resource are 72 semi-directed interviews conducted between November 2019 and November 2022 with actors directly involved in the policy process. Whilst 29 of our interviews were with French public servants and government

²Interview with Defence industry lobbyist, Belgium, via Zoom, 2 March 2022.

advisers, we spoke to a diversified group of actors to triangulate their version of events. We interviewed 10 officials and three independent experts from other EU member states, three non-EU trade representatives, 15 lobbyists and 12 EU (Commission, External Action Service, Court of Justice) officials. Although we also asked questions related to policy substance, the guiding thread of these interviews were actors' use, day-to-day encounter and interpretation of the 'European sovereignty' discourse. We framed this discourse to include not only the term itself but also its issue-specific variants ('digital sovereignty', 'technological sovereignty', 'economic sovereignty', etc.) and the closely related concept of 'European strategic autonomy'. Our findings are informed by the entirety of these interviews, but due to space constraints and to avoid repetition, fewer than half (33) of them are quoted in this article.

II. Our Argument: The 'European Sovereignty' Discourse at the Service of French Dirigisme

The use of 'European sovereignty' by Macron and the French government is not strictly speaking a sovereignty claim. Instead, it corresponds to an example of securitisation defined by Buzan, De Wilde and Waever as a situation where an actor '(manages) to break free of procedures or rules he or she would otherwise be bound by', through the use of 'an argument about the priority and urgency of an existential threat' (Buzan et al. 1998, p. 25). In many instances, invoking 'sovereignty' allowed the French government to displace 'economic' matters into the realm of 'security' and, correspondingly, to legitimise government intervention to the detriment of the market-based allocation of resources and free trade. Despite EU policy-makers' continuing belief that 'openness is always more efficient', security considerations paved the way for policy change.³ France, just like other member states, has been seeking to steer EU economic governance closer towards its own economic model (Fioretos 2001).

France's political economy has consistently been described as 'post-dirigiste', 'neo-dirigiste' or 'neo-mercantilist' referring to state elites' pre-eminent role to set priorities and direct the allocation of economic resources (Schmidt 1996; Clift 2012; Ansaloni and Smith 2018; Warlouzet 2019). In addition to formal institutions and public policies, dirigisme relies on a number of informal practices and discourses (Loriaux 1999, p. 237). The discursive association between industrial policy and 'sovereignty' is particularly well rooted. Writing in 1992, economist Élie Cohen remarked that 'we cannot understand anything about the insistence of the French to export their model of industrial intervention (to the EU) if we don't integrate (the) dimension of sovereignty' (Cohen 1992a, p. 22). When one looks carefully, there are even isolated instances where French presidents before Macron linked EU-level industrial policy with 'European sovereignty'. As early as January 2007, President Jacques Chirac had argued that it was time for the EU to 'exercise its economic sovereignty' by 'reforming its competition policy to take globalization into account' and 'adopting an offensive commercial policy in equal terms with other powers' (Chirac 2007). This historical inclination remains very much intact. To this day, politicians constantly link the 'state's commitment to the security of French industries' to 'issues of sovereignty' (Ansaloni and Smith 2018, pp. 172–173). The implementation of

³Interview with official, DG TRADE, via Zoom, 22 April 2022.

an interventionist ‘industrial policy’ and the creation of ‘European champions’ is a longstanding ambition of France. In parallel, EU competition rules were depicted as an impediment to this objective (Warlouzet 2019). French governments’ consistent support for expansionary fiscal policies at both the national and EU level can similarly be attributed to the country’s dirigiste economic model (Dyson 1999; Clift 2006).

However, it was only under the Macron presidency that the French government sought to ‘upload’ the discourse of ‘economic sovereignty’ to the EU level in such high-profile and consistent manner. A combination of domestic, EU-level and international factors explain why this strategy was applied under Macron and not before. At the domestic level, the 2017 presidential campaign and subsequent election results fundamentally reconfigured the political landscape. Prior to Macron’s victory, French political life was dominated by centre-right and centre-left political parties. As evident from the 1992 Maastricht treaty and 2005 European constitutional referenda, European integration had been a crosscutting cleavage that ran across party lines (Hooghe and Marks 2018). Both the Parti Socialiste and its successive centre-right rivals had a significant Eurosceptic element in their ranks and electoral base and consequently adopted a ‘double discourse’ towards the EU. In stark contrast, Macron’s centrist and overwhelmingly pro-EU electoral base allowed him to ‘establish the European issue as the main cleavage for French politics’ and did not hesitate to build his political offer around a contentious concept like ‘European sovereignty’ (cf. Rozenberg 2020, pp. 78–83).

At the EU level, Britain’s exit has most likely been an enabling factor for the ‘European sovereignty’ discourse (Chopin and Lequesne 2021). For reasons of both economic liberalism and national sovereignty, ‘the British would have surely blocked the European sovereignty discourse’.⁴ Another enabling factor has been the perceived indeterminacy of German preferences due to internal divisions.⁵ Referring to the relevance of ‘technological sovereignty’ in competition policy, one Commission official describes Germany as a ‘swing state’ between liberal and interventionist countries.⁶ Whereas economy minister Peter Altmaier, described by different sources as a ‘francophile’ and a ‘old friend’ of his French counterpart Bruno Le Maire, adhered to the ‘European sovereignty’ discourse, many within German industrial circles and even in his own ministry were sceptical.⁷ The domestic controversy surrounding the February 2019 national industrial strategy further illustrates this point (Bofinger 2019).

Finally at the global level, the ‘European sovereignty’ discourse capitalised on a global context marked by Britain’s exit from the EU and Donald Trump’s election victory, not to mention the Covid-19 pandemic and Russian invasion of Ukraine. Practitioners but also scholars are persuaded to live at a time where the liberal international order is ‘being challenged from within and without in unprecedented ways’ (Lake et al. 2021, pp. 235–236). Whilst this interplay of domestic, EU-level and global factors created a window of opportunity for the French government, it was through the discursive practice of ‘European

⁴Interview with official, French Directorate for Treasury, Ministry of the Economy, via Zoom, 22 October 2021.

⁵Interviews with official from French Permanent Representation to the EU, via Zoom, 8 September 2022, and with EU diplomat, country non-disclosed, Zoom, 28 September 28th 2022.

⁶Interview with official, DG COMP via phone, 24 March 2022.

⁷Interviews with official, French Ministry of the Economy, in person, 16 December 2019, and with Chemical industry lobbyist, Germany, via phone, 1 April 2022.

sovereignty' that the French government sought to convert this opportunity into policy outcomes.

III. 'European Sovereignty' across Four Policy Proposals

Whilst we do not address every aspect of this 12,515 word Sorbonne speech, four policy proposals associated with 'European sovereignty' can be identified: '*refondation démocratique*' of the EU, a 'common strategic culture', 'European champions' and a 'Eurozone budget'. We demonstrate in the next section that some of these proposals defined France's EU policy under the Macron presidency, whilst others were never seriously envisioned.

'*Refondation démocratique*'

Even if this is often omitted, initiating a '*refondation démocratique*' of the EU was one of the major elements of president Macron's 2017 Sorbonne speech on 'European sovereignty' and a part of his broader image at the time. Self-reflecting on his use of the term 'European sovereignty', Macron argued that allowing 'nationalists to capture the notion of sovereignty' had been a 'political mistake' (Macron 2016b, 2017b). During his presidential campaign, he participated in a highly publicised event with philosopher Jürgen Habermas and German foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel, where he insisted on the need to invigorate European public debate. Both in the Sorbonne speech and the previous ones in the Athenian Acropolis, one of the guiding themes is that the EU's legitimacy is threatened by populist movements and that revitalising EU-level democracy is required (Macron 2017a). As a remedy, the French president advocated for the organising of 'democratic conventions' and for enabling transnational lists in the 2019 European elections by using the 73 seats freed up by British MEPs. As for the 2024 elections, Macron expressed his wish that 'half of the European Parliament be elected through these transnational lists' (Macron 2017b). Although it would have been a radical move if implemented, no steps have been taken towards this direction in the years following the 2017 Sorbonne speech, with the exception of the 2021 'Conference on the Future in Europe', merely a consultative forum. On the contrary, Macron exhibited an intergovernmental and top-down understanding of European institutions characteristic of his predecessors (Rozenberg 2020). Importantly, the French president blocked the European People's Party's candidate Manfred Weber's in his nomination for Commission president in 2019, asserting member states' discretion over the nomination process and suspending the *Spitzenkandidat* system.

The meaning conferred to 'sovereignty' by French government officials did not have much to do with political participation. Within the Sorbonne speech itself, 'sovereignty' has been defined as the material capacity to 'exist within the contemporary world', in a context of globalisation (Macron 2017b). This understanding comes closest to the term 'interdependence sovereignty' defined by Stephen Krasner as the 'ability of public authorities to regulate the flow of information, ideas, goods, people, pollutants, or capital across the borders of their state' (Krasner 1999, p. 4). Despite the sporadic calls for more democracy at the European level, the French government's discourse on 'European sovereignty'

is unconcerned with the distribution of authority within the EU polity. As a French diplomat puts it, ‘the supranational/national debate is of absolutely no interest to (them)’.⁸

Insistence is instead placed on capacity building. Minister of the Economy and Finances Bruno Le Maire told the French Senate in September 2019 that ‘one can jump on their chair and speak of political sovereignty all day long (...); if your cars are driven by foreign software and your communications transit through foreign fiber, you have no political sovereignty’ (French Senate 2019, p. 416). This definition of sovereignty as capability rather than claim to legitimate authority is the precise reasoning which Macron used to justify that ‘sovereignty can only be European in the 21st century’ (Macron 2017b). Put simply, ‘doing something Franco-French is very nice but the market is just too small compared to the Chinese and the Americans’.⁹

In sum, the question of distributing authority within the polity is peripheral within the ‘European sovereignty’ discourse.

‘Common strategic culture’

Another proposal that Emmanuel Macron mentioned in the Sorbonne speech was the development of a ‘common strategic culture’ amongst EU member states. Throughout his presidency, Macron presented himself as a dedicated proponent of a more assertive European defence policy, repeatedly calling for the creation of a ‘European army’ and ‘strategic autonomy’. This was justified by highly controversial remarks on the ‘brain death’ of NATO, which he argued rendered the organisation incapable of upholding the security interests of the EU (Macron 2019). Taken at face value, this discourse would be understood as a call to significantly deepen European cooperation in defence and turning the EU into a full-fledged actor in military affairs. Besides from the March 2022 Strategic Compass, a non-binding document, there is little to indicate that this ambition is materialising. French officials tend to attribute this to other member states’ much greater reticence towards ‘European sovereignty’ in defence compared to other fields like trade and industrial policy.¹⁰ Although evident, other member states’ objections do not provide a full explanation. In fact, Macron’s discourse on ‘European sovereignty’ is an overstatement of what France tried to achieve on the ground in terms of defence policy cooperation. In the Sorbonne speech itself, Emmanuel Macron associated ‘European sovereignty’ with the creation of a ‘European Intervention Initiative’ (EII) (Macron 2017b). This characterisation was hyperbolic to say the least as the EII is an intergovernmental and *ad hoc* forum situated outside of EU institutions (Major and Mölling 2017). As Samuel Faure rightly argues, much of Macron’s defence policy doctrine including the nuclear deterrence doctrine, critical attitude of NATO and attempts to instate a ‘strategic dialogue’ with Russia reveals continuing attachment to ‘national’ rather than ‘European sovereignty’ (Faure 2020b, p. 151). The French government’s allies are similarly sceptical about France’s commitment to European defence policy integration. In the words of a senior EU member state diplomat, ‘when Macron speaks of a common strategic culture he expects other Europeans to adhere

⁸Interview with official, Directorate for Europe, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, via Zoom, 26 July 2022.

⁹Interview with official, French General Secretariat for European Affairs, in person, 12 December 2019.

¹⁰Interviews with official, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, via phone, 12 July 2021, and with official, Directorate for Political and Security Affairs, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, via phone, 3 February 2022.

to France's strategic culture'.¹¹ In sum, the proliferation of a discourse on 'European sovereignty' is not accompanied by any tangible change in France's *defence policy* input into EU politics.

The true significance of 'European sovereignty' instead lies in *defence industrial policy*, a domain where Macron pursued a radically different policy program based on 'the weakening of the state's role to the benefit of supranational governance' and 'Europe through the market' (Faure 2020b, p. 164). Given the competitive edge of its defence companies, France is uniquely positioned to capture market shares within an integrated EU defence market. Macron's 'European sovereignty' discourse is unlikely to be driven by an alleged (and much exaggerated) 'Gaullism' of the country's foreign and security policy elites (Lequesne 2017). In the French foreign ministry, the risk of offending the US 'remains a topic of absolute vigilance' in contrast to 'Bercy (the economy ministry) where European sovereignty is less of a problem'.¹² Macron's own background as economy ministry official as well as his policy preferences further indicate that his 'European sovereignty' discourse in defence is driven by Bercy's industrial policy designs rather than security considerations (c.f.: Faure 2020a).

On one hand, Macron's 'European sovereignty' discourse perpetuates and reinforces an existing coalition of stakeholders including French, German and Commission officials and business actors, 'using' security threats to advance defence industrial integration (Béraud-Sudreau and Pannier 2021). Economies of scale are thus depicted as indispensable for 'European sovereignty', an argument long defended by the European Commission (Juncker 2018). Calcara and Simon (2021, p. 875) show that 'president Emmanuel Macron's impulse and cooperation with Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker provided the political foundation for the 8 billion euros European Defence Fund (EDF) and ensured that the initiative kept momentum and support'. A closely associated development has been the creation of a Directorate General for Defence and Space (DG DEFIS), which the French government ensured would be under the authority of French internal market commissioner Thierry Breton, a close ally of Macron.¹³ On the other hand, Macron and the French government use the 'European sovereignty' discourse to push this existing defence industrial coalition towards a much more protectionist direction. Dirigisme in defence industrial integration entails restrictions on producers based outside of the EU.

The discourse of 'European sovereignty' has consistently been used to justify a 'European preference' in armaments purchases, whether it concerns the allocation of EU funds and even bilateral arms trade (Parly 2021). In addition to secure market share within the EU, the French government wants to ensure that its armament exports are not affected by the US's ITAR regulations.¹⁴ A Commission official suggests that 'while for some member states European sovereignty is about having the right weapons on time, for the French it is about having European material'.¹⁵ Without excluding derogations, Article 8 of the EDF regulation restricts the access of third country producers (Official Journal of the EU 2021). Negotiations are ongoing on a common weapons procurement instrument,

¹¹ Interview with EU diplomat, country non-disclosed, in person, 14 January 2022.

¹² Interview with official, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, via Zoom, 22 April 2022.

¹³ Interviews with Commission official, DG non-disclosed, via phone, 27 June 2022, and EU diplomat, country non-disclosed, Zoom, 10 November 2022.

¹⁴ Interview with information technology executive, France, via phone, 24 February 2020.

¹⁵ Interview with DG DEFIS Official, European Commission, via Zoom, 27 September 2022.

and third country access remains the most salient issue. Although the outcome is yet to be seen, the Commission's initial draft suggests that Russia's invasion of Ukraine allowed France to reinforce its policy positions (European Commission 2022b).¹⁶ Speaking at defence industry forum Eurosatory, Macron argued that the return of high intensity warfare is further proof that Europeans 'should not build tomorrow's dependencies in a geopolitical world where what (they) imagined unthinkable always ended up happening' (Macron 2022).

Recent developments including the EDF are best understood within a broader context of dirigisme (Smith 2022, pp. 24–27). The EU's defence industrial policy is driven by a 'sociotechnical imaginary' partly inspired by the role of military programmes in fostering commercial innovation in the United States (Martins and Mawdsley 2021, p. 1458). Tellingly, the US Defence Advanced Projects Research Agency is a reference frequently used by French officials (Macron 2017b).

'European Champions'

Industrial policy constitutes the very core of the discourse on 'European sovereignty'. Tellingly, this is also the area where 'European sovereignty' first entered Emmanuel Macron's political lexicon. As early as April 2015, then Minister of the Economy Macron invoked Europe's 'digital sovereignty' and hence the need to create 'champions' in order to justify Nokia's acquisition of French phone manufacturer Alcatel (Les Échos 2015). As we previously showed, French policy-makers systematically depict 'technological sovereignty' as a prerequisite of 'political sovereignty' (French Senate 2019, p. 416). Emmanuel Macron's Sorbonne speech is no different in this regard. As for the methods for ensuring this 'technological sovereignty', the EU needs to create the 'champions' of tomorrow (Macron 2017b). This idea of 'European champions' repeatedly used by president Macron consists in the Europeanisation of the older notion of 'national champions', leading companies whose success is believed to contribute to national power and prestige. Whilst they originate in the post-war period, the market-oriented reforms of the 1980s did not fundamentally question the existence of national champions (Viallet-Thévenin 2015). Many have become successful multinational corporations and simultaneously maintained their ties to the French state through what Ben Clift describes as 'the inter-penetration of public and private elitist networks' (Clift 2012, p. 567).

Throughout the decades, little has changed in terms of the legitimising narrative (Servan-Schreiber 1967). The government's support for these private companies is justified by their alleged importance for 'national' and increasingly 'European sovereignty'. Referring to a threat of technological dependence, certain firms are depicted as security assets, hence legitimising political intervention to favour and protect them. The area where France's preferences clash most intensely with EU governance is competition policy, where ordoliberal norms are particularly influential and the Commission has exclusive competency since the late 1980s (Clift 2013; Warloutzet 2017, p. 160). Whilst 'European sovereignty' requires the creation of 'European champions' like aircraft manufacturer Airbus, this is deemed no longer possible because of competition rules.¹⁷

¹⁶Interviews with official from the French Permanent Representation to the EU, via phone, 18 September 2022, and with EU diplomat, Political and Security Committee, country non-disclosed, Zoom, 14 October 2022.

¹⁷Interview with official, French General Secretariat for European Affairs, in person, 12 December 2019.

Already on the campaign trail, French presidential candidate Macron lamented that Europeans have ‘lost the terms of sovereignty in competition policy’ because, in contrast to the Americans and the Chinese, they cannot ‘create global giants’ (Macron 2016a). During the Macron presidency, France’s dissatisfaction with the existing framework on merger controls was crystallised in the public clash over the acquisition of French train manufacturer Alstom by its German competitor Siemens, negotiated for many years and planned to occur in early 2019. This concentration of the European railway industry was justified by competition from their state-owned Chinese rival. Following its refusal to approve the merger, French Minister of the economy Bruno Le Maire would accuse the Commission of ‘having committed an economic error and a political mistake’ (AFP 2019). A mere 2 weeks later, Bruno Le Maire and his German counterpart Peter Altmaier published a ‘Franco-German manifesto for a European industrial policy fit for the 21st century’. This document draws attention to the fact that ‘amongst the top 40 companies in the world, only 5 are European’. The lack of a ‘regulatory global level playing field’ had ‘(put) European companies at a massive disadvantage’, and there was a need to ‘update the current merger guidelines’. This objective was not only to defend the market share of companies but ‘Europe’s economic sovereignty and independence’. In other words, its ‘strategic autonomy’ (Altmaier and Le Maire 2019). The explicit goal was to ‘apply political pressure’ and create an ‘ideological shift in how the European Commission implements competition policy’.¹⁸ These proposals have been successful as the Commission revised its market definition notice for the first time since 1997 (Meunier and Mickus 2020, p. 1085).¹⁹ An even more important aspect of competition policy where the discourse of ‘European sovereignty’ was used is state aid control. Since the 1980s, EU control of state aids had rendered large-scale industrial policy extremely difficult. By the mid-2010s, China’s rise in increasingly technology-intensive sectors and Trump’s election as US president have enabled the French government to be more assertive about its preferences and advocate for updating of these rules in order to enable certain derogations in industries deemed to be strategic.²⁰ This was to be done through the ‘Important Projects of Common European Interest’ (IPCEI) clause of the Maastricht Treaty. Whilst Article 107.3 of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty briefly mentions ‘important projects of common European interest’, where governments can obtain a derogation from the Commission to provide state aid, no ‘IPCEI’ came to being in the first 26 years following the introduction of this Treaty. An update of these rules was only proposed in 2014 and the first IPCEI was not granted until 2018 when 1.75 billion euros of state aids were approved for the microelectronics industry (European Commission 2018). Subsequently, a total of 18 billion euros have been allocated in less than for 4 years.²¹

Beyond the IPCEI reform, the ‘European sovereignty’ discourse legitimised the French government and its ally Commissioner Breton to meet each new security threat with new forms of vertical industrial policy. In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, the February 2022 Chips Act allocated 30 billion euros in public investment for the EU’s

¹⁸ Interview with official, French Ministry of the Economy, in person, 16 December 2019.

¹⁹ Interview with lobbyist, electronics industry, Belgium, via Zoom, 29 April 2022.

²⁰ Interview with official, French Directorate General for Enterprise, Ministry of the Economy, via phone, 19 February 2020, and official, French Directorate General for Enterprise, via Zoom, Ministry of the Economy, 15 March 2021.

²¹ The amount of €18 billion is an estimation compiling publicly available information on each project, namely, €1.7 bn in electronics, €6.1 bn in batteries and €10.6 bn in hydrogen.

semi-conductor industry (European Commission 2022a). In a clear reversal of existing doctrine, the EU's dependence towards the outside world has been sufficient to diagnose a 'market failure'.²² Russia's invasion of Ukraine 'reinforced French theses' and paved the way for a number of new industrial policy tools including the controversial single market emergency instrument.²³ As a non-EU trade representative put it, 'the use of the term European sovereignty increased with each new crisis'.²⁴ Correspondingly, EU competition policy went through a paradigm shift (Meunier and Mickus 2020). In sum, the 'European sovereignty' discourse has been deployed extensively (and successfully) in the area of competition policy to realise the French government's longstanding industrial policy objectives.

Eurozone Budget

Finally, Emmanuel Macron's Sorbonne speech contained a proposal to create a 'Eurozone budget' to be piloted by a 'common minister'. This would contribute to 'European sovereignty' by enabling the Euro area to become an 'economic powerhouse able to compete with China and the United States'. Critically, the proposed Eurozone budget would be financed by EU-level fiscal resources in the digital and environmental fields (Macron 2017b). The proposal for a Eurozone budget and common fiscal resources was certainly substantive, and the French government has pushed this proposal in a consistent manner. In his advocacy for 'European sovereignty' (or, more concretely, for a Eurozone budget) in fiscal policy, President Macron was in continuity with his predecessors. The Eurozone budget had already been proposed by former French president François Hollande. Moreover, the French insistence on the need for a '*gouvernement économique*' in the European Monetary Union goes back to the 1980s (Howarth 2007; Schild 2020).

A significant advance came in June 2018 with the Meseberg Declaration, where France and Germany agreed on a genuine Eurozone budget, albeit one that was 10 times smaller than suggested by President Macron (Howarth and Schild 2021).

Whilst the German government was ambivalent on the question, a coalition of Northern states led by the Netherlands were outright dismissive. In terms of policy substance, the Northern states would successfully replace the Eurozone budget with the much less ambitious 'Budgetary Instrument for Convergence and Competitiveness' (Schoeller 2021). In a thinly veiled rebuttal of President Macron's proposal, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte would emphasise the EU's nature as a Union of 'sovereign member states', rejecting the Eurozone budget along with what he described as calls for 'more Europe' (Rutte 2018). French economy minister Bruno Le Maire and Commissioner Moscovici's calls for asserting 'European tax sovereignty' through common taxes were left unanswered (Le Maire and Moscovici 2018). As a French economy ministry official explains, 'most Northern European countries were against it while Germany played a double game'.²⁵

²²Interview with EU diplomat, country non-disclosed, Zoom, 28 September 2022.

²³Interview with official from French Permanent Representation to the EU, via Zoom, 8 September 2022.

²⁴Interview with non-EU Trade representative, country non-disclosed, via Zoom, 24 June 2022.

²⁵Interview with official, French Ministry of the Economy, in person, 16 December 2019.

The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic and resulting recession would allow the French government to move beyond this deadlock and achieve some successes. Whilst no Eurozone budget materialised, the 750 billion euros Covid-19 Recovery Fund broke the taboo of common borrowing (Schelkle 2021). Furthermore, the need to pay for the Recovery Fund had the broader repercussion of bringing the issue of common fiscal resources onto the agenda. In the July 2020 Conclusions of the European Council, member states instructed the Commission to ‘introduce new own resources’ including ‘proposals on a carbon border adjustment mechanisms and on a digital levy’ (European Council 2020a, p. 8). Negotiations on digital taxation moved to the OECD level and are at an inconclusive stage. On the other hand, an agreement was found in March 2022 for a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism albeit on a legal basis of commercial rather than fiscal policy.²⁶

These relative successes did not render the ‘European sovereignty’ discourse any more acceptable in the area of fiscal policy. The French government itself generally refrained from resorting to this discourse, notably during negotiations with Germany on the Covid-19 Recovery Plan. Publicly, Macron and other EU leaders who shared his preferences chose a different argumentative strategy and insisted that Covid-19 was an ‘symmetric crisis’ and thus moral hazard concerns were far less relevant than the debt crisis of the 2010s (Euractiv 2020; Schelkle 2021, p. 46). As a top-level French official reports, ‘there was not much of a connection between the response to the crisis and the European sovereignty discourse’.²⁷ There has been at least one occasion where French president Macron justified the revision of EU fiscal deficit rules on the grounds of ‘European technological sovereignty’ and the corresponding need for public investment (Draghi and Macron 2021). Like competition policy reform, France’s preference to increase the fiscal space available to national governments and EU institutions is grounded in the country’s state-led variety of capitalism. The need to finance ‘European public goods’ through a Eurozone budget is also a key component of the ‘European sovereignty’ discourse mobilised by president Macron from the start of his presidential campaign.²⁸ However, the strategy used by the French government in competition policy could not be replicated in this area. Openly speaking of ‘European sovereignty’ still appears to be taboo in fiscal policy because it would be associated with ‘fiscal federalism’.²⁹

In sum, fiscal policy presents an area where the French government could not effectively deploy the ‘European sovereignty’ discourse. Macron and other government officials invoked geopolitical competition against China and the United States to advocate for an expansionary fiscal policy, an essential feature of dirigisme (Dyson 1999; Clift 2006). That said, they discarded the ‘European sovereignty’ discourse when it quickly became apparent that it antagonised other member states.

Conclusion

This article studied president Macron and other French officials’ use of the discourse on ‘European sovereignty’. Taking president Emmanuel Macron’s September 2017 speech at

²⁶ Interview with official from French Permanent Representation to the EU, via Zoom, 26 September 2022.

²⁷ Interview with official, French Directorate for Treasury, Ministry of the Economy, via Zoom, 22 October 2021.

²⁸ Interview with former economic advisor to French president Emmanuel Macron, via Zoom, 15 June 2022.

²⁹ Interview with former economic advisor to German chancellor Olaf Scholz, via phone, 7 June 2022.

the Sorbonne as our starting point, we examined four major policy proposals associated with ‘European sovereignty’. Whilst the ostensible objectives for invoking ‘European sovereignty’ are to revitalise EU level democracy and to imbue the EU with a geopolitical mission, we made the rather straightforward argument that its true motives lied in the realisation of French economic interests (Moravcsik 1998). More specifically, the invocation of ‘sovereignty’ in economic governance and the corresponding securitisation of market governance is a national practice that already existed in France for decades (Cohen 1992b). In uploading it to the EU level, Macron and the French government were seeking to steer EU economic governance closer towards dirigisme. In defence industrial policy and competition policy, the ‘European sovereignty’ discourse achieved considerable staying power.

On the other hand, the discourse was far less successful in fiscal policy, where it failed to leave an imprint. Although Macron and the French government pursued a similar strategy and sought to justify the creation of a Eurozone budget with the need for ‘European public goods’ comparable with those of the two other major economic blocs, China and the United States. Despite the fact that the 2017–2022 period saw major developments like the Covid Recovery Plan and common fiscal resources, ‘European sovereignty’ remained taboo.

Christian Bueger suggests that one of the research strategies suitable to the practice turn is the ‘tracing of artefacts in the form of objects and technologies but also in the format of language artefacts, such as concepts or metaphors’. A plethora of practices are ‘inscribed’ within an artefact, and their evolution can be traced through it (Bueger 2014, p. 397). Our inquiry into ‘European sovereignty’ showed that this strategy can lead to promising outcomes in the study of EU politics. Whilst a literature already exists on member states’ ability to upload policies to the EU level, their propensity to upload discursive practices is understudied (Börzel 2002). The success of ‘European sovereignty’ has been uneven, and it is still early to tell whether it will leave a durable imprint on EU politics. Nonetheless, it presents a very interesting and most likely not unique case where a member state resorted to re-shape aspects of EU governance in its own image through the use of a discursive practice.

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