

THE FRENCH PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Slobodan ZEČEVIĆ*

Abstract: On January 1, 2022, France took over the presidency of the Council of the European Union for six months, after 13 years of waiting caused by the increase in the number of member states. One of the main priorities of the French presidency is to build a fully sovereign Europe, which will improve cooperation within its borders and achieve the status of a powerful Europe on a world scale, completely sovereign, free in its choices and the master of its own destiny. One of the ways to achieve European sovereignty is to deepen and strengthen European defense, which, in the opinion of the French president, should go into the operational phase. In that sense, Macron welcomed the establishment of the European Defense Fund. This goal of the French presidency was realized on March 21, 2022, with the adoption of the Strategic Compass by the EU ministers for security and foreign affairs. Another important goal of the French presidency is to establish a new European model of economic growth. Innovation, production, and job creation should be encouraged in the Union, which would strengthen its competitiveness against China and the United States. The European Union needs to achieve technological sovereignty and high results in the field of environmental protection (climate neutrality and carbon tax at the borders). However, the Ukrainian crisis has somewhat disturbed the program of the French presidency of the EU Council.

Keywords: European Union, EU Council Presidency, European Sovereignty, European Defense Policy, EU Strategic Compass, New Model of European Economic Growth, Ukrainian Crisis

INTRODUCTION

On January 1, 2022, France took over the presidency of the Council of the European Union for six months (Programme de la présidence, 2022,

* Professor, Institute of European Studies, Belgrade, E-mail: szecevic@gmail.com

January 1). France is chairing the Council after 13 years of waiting due to an increase in the number of member states. Namely, when, during the 60s of the last century, the European Communities consisted of six states, France held the presidency every 2.5 years. Today, France needs to wait 13 years for the change of the representatives of 26 European Union members to be appointed to that position (Ledroit, 2022, January 19). The presidency of Emmanuel Macron differs from that of Nicolas Sarkozy in 2008, as he will not serve as president of the European Council, a body that brings together heads of state or governments of EU member states. Since the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, this European institution has had a permanent president who is elected for 2.5 years with the possibility of renewing his mandate. Charles Michel, from Belgium, is currently in this position. Regardless of the preceding, the presidency of the Council of the European Union has its own importance, especially because of the legislative competencies of this body, which it shares with the European Parliament. The competence of the legislative initiative belongs to the European Commission. The presidents of the EU Council change every six months in the rhythm of January-June and July-December. Regardless of the shortness of the mandate, the chairman of the Council is not unprepared to perform his function because a system of *troikas* has been established. Three member states that successively perform the function of the chairman will determine long-term tasks, i.e., the topics they will deal with in the next 18 months. France is forming a *troika* with the Czech Republic, which will succeed France in July 2022, and Sweden, which will perform its duties in the first six months of 2023. Of these three countries, only France is the founder of the Union and a member of the Eurozone. At the same time, the President follows the legislative agenda and seeks to reach a compromise within the Council of the European Union that would allow a legislative act to be adopted while simultaneously cooperating with the European Parliament in the framework of legislative procedure (Simon, 2001, p. 204). The French Minister will chair each of the nine Council formations corresponding to the specific areas (general affairs; economic and financial affairs; justice and home affairs; employment, social policy, health and consumers; competitiveness - internal market, industry, research and space; transport, telecommunications, energy, agriculture and fisheries, environment, education, youth, culture and sports). The President of the EU Council has the intention of marking his presidency by giving certain guidelines and insisting on certain issues (Manin, 2005, p. 278). In this regard, at a press conference held on December 9, 2021, Emanuel Macron outlined the priorities of the French presidency of the European Union with the slogan "Renewal, strength, membership". The

emblem of the French presidency is the initials of the European Union in the color of the French flag with an arrow in the middle, which signifies an ambitious intention to move things from the deadlock (Programme de la présidence, 2022, January 1).

SOVEREIGN EUROPE - THE MAIN OBJECTIVE OF THE FRENCH PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

One of the main priorities of the French presidency is to achieve a completely sovereign Europe (*Ibidem*). The goal is to improve cooperation within the borders of the Union and achieve the status of a powerful European entity on a world scale, completely sovereign, free in its choices, and the master of its own destiny. One of the ways to achieve European sovereignty is to deepen and strengthen the European defense policy, which, in the opinion of the French president, should reach the operational phase. In that sense, Macron welcomed the establishment of the European Defense Fund, which should be used for the joint European production of weapons. The realization of the basic goal of the French presidency was partially achieved on March 21, 2022, through the adoption of a strategic compass by the Ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs of the European Union, which renewed European orientations in the field of defense (Palluet, 2022, March 22). The 47-page document identifies four pillars of action. The first pillar refers to an accurate response to crises. In that sense, a unit for fast action within the Union will be formed with 5,000 soldiers. The second pillar is based on the thesis that "security and response to hybrid threats should be provided". The third pillar is based on the idea of increasing investment in the defense sector. The idea is to push all EU members to invest more in military capacity. In that sense, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz started an investment cycle of 100 billion euros in military equipment. Denmark has long believed that it should not participate in European military cooperation because its protection within the NATO pact is sufficient. However, it announces a referendum on joining the European Common Security and Defense Policy. For the first time, the Union has decided to use budget funds of 500 million euros to buy military equipment that will be delivered to Ukraine as a third country. Some member states believe that military spending should not be taken into account in the framework of the *European budget rules* (budgetary discipline), which, by the way, have been suspended in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The fourth pillar is called "*working in partnership*" and refers to cooperation with NATO, the OSCE, and the African Union. It is certain that the Ukrainian crisis had a great impact on

the content of this document. In this context, it should be borne in mind that Emanuel Macron wanted to revive the *Degolistic* vision of French foreign policy. Originally, the process of European integration launched in the early 1960s was supposed to serve as a multiplier of economic development for France to compensate for the loss of colonial possessions. After coming to power in 1958, President De Gaulle wanted to impose French leadership on his partners through the implementation of the Treaty on the European Economic Community (Velruise, 2014, May 7). De Gaulle's strategy consisted of achieving: 1) strong economic development by using the process of European integration; 2) installing the control of the German state, which was the French main rival in the 19th and 20th centuries; and 3) transforming the European Communities into the European Union under French domination, with expanded competencies in the fields of foreign affairs and defense, treated equally with the United States and the USSR (Zečević, 2015, p. 433). However, France failed to convince its European partners of the need to build an independent European defense. The initial plan was to use and develop the French military industry to serve as an independent European defense. In that sense, we should also have in mind the statement of President Emmanuel Macron from November 2019 that the *NATO alliance is clinically dead* (Le Figaro, 2019, November 7). The German Minister of Defense, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, immediately replied that she believed there was no convincing defense of the European Union outside the framework of the NATO pact. She also underlined that she is committed to American military protection. The Ukrainian crisis has breathed new life into NATO, justifying its existence. President Biden's Administration is working to strengthen strategic ties with European partners and reinforce NATO's leading role in Europe. In this context, the thesis of the French president from 2019 seems outdated. According to the French president, European sovereignty has to be built up through better supervision of the external and internal borders of the European Union. Specifically, Macron proposes the reform of the Schengen agreements, which subject is the abolition of borders between member states. Macron also suggests political management of this area through more frequent meetings of interior ministers of the member states, as well as the creation of an Emergency Support Mechanism to deal with emergency situations at the Union's external borders. In the case of the Ukraine crisis, the large influx of refugees into the European Union has not become an acute problem because these people belong to European, Christian culture and civilization. Their integration into European societies is not questionable.

**A NEW MODEL OF EUROPEAN ECONOMIC GROWTH
- THE NEXT IMPORTANT OBJECTIVE OF THE FRENCH
PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION**

Another important goal of the French presidency is to establish a new European model of economic growth that should transform the European economy until 2030. The EU should encourage innovation, production, and job creation, which would strengthen European competitiveness vis-à-vis China and the United States. The EU needs to achieve technological sovereignty and high environmental performance (climate neutrality and carbon tax at EU borders). The goal of the French presidency was also to create a European digital market. In that sense, an extraordinary European summit on the mentioned topics should have been held in Brussels on March 10 and 11, 2022. Instead, a summit under the French presidency was held in Versailles, a luxury suburb near Paris, because the Ukrainian crisis disrupted the European plans. At this meeting, the task of reducing dependence on Russia in the field of energy (gas, oil, and coal) was set. The goal of self-sufficiency in the fields of food production, semiconductors, and rare metals was also set. The Commission was empowered to prepare concrete proposals in this regard. On that occasion, the French president, Emmanuel Macron, underlined that his initiative on building European sovereignty was not a fantasy but a real need. At the European summit held in Brussels on March 25, 2022, the European Commission received authorization (mandate) to realize joint group gas procurement, including for the countries of the Western Balkans, whose perspective of joining the EU was recognized. According to Emmanuel Macron, that was the best way to bring down purchase prices. However, the European policy of economic sanctions against Russia was a double-edged sword policy. Sanctions imposed on Russia led to an increase in the prices of oil, gas, rare metals, and cereals, which caused an increase in the prices of almost all products in Europe in return and had negative effects on economic growth. In such crises, households are not prone to consumption, and companies refrain from investing. The globalized economy is a system of communicating vessels where the war in one part of the planet affects the economic development of all participants in the world market.

THE FRENCH PRESIDENCY OF THE EU COUNCIL IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ENLARGEMENT POLICY FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

The program of the French presidency of the EU Council also mentions the Western Balkans countries. In that sense, President Emmanuel Macron believes that the next European Union-Western Balkans conference should be dedicated to the fight against foreign influences in this area, especially those coming from Russia, China, and Turkey. The conference should contribute to the re-engagement of the EU in our region. Macron believes that peace in Europe cannot be built in the next 50 years if the situation in the Balkans remains as it is. In that sense, the European perspective of the Balkan states should be clarified. Does that mean speeding up the process of accession of the Balkan states, especially if we have in mind the Ukrainian experience? In any case, this issue ceases to be only technical but becomes geostrategic and political. It is necessary to take a political decision about the accession of Montenegro and Serbia, and then other Balkan states, to membership in the European Union. At the same time, the EU should not renounce the right to apply in practice the new methodology of pre-accession negotiations and to insist on the application of the basic values of the European Union in the candidate member states. The experience with the accession of Central and Eastern European countries gave indications in favor of the thesis that the enlargement process has served as an incentive to strengthen European integration. Namely, the precisely defined time schedule of the accession dictated the institutional changes in the European Union. The European Communities, which had competences only in the economic sphere, with the successive reforms carried out by the Treaties of Maastricht in 1993, Amsterdam in 1999, Nice in 2003 and Lisbon in 2009, grew into the European Union, which was given wider competences. These are monetary competencies (introduction of the single currency, establishment of the European Central Bank), as well as competencies in the field of foreign affairs and security policy.

THE ISSUE OF ACCELERATED ACCESSION OF UKRAINE TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

The President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, on March 1, 2022, in front of the members of the European Parliament, demanded an accelerated procedure for access to the European Union for his country (Giandomenico, 2002, March 10). Accelerated admission should be contained in a special

procedure that is not provided by European Union law. According to Article 49 of the Treaty on the European Union, European states may be admitted to membership if they respect the fundamental values of the EU (Manin, 2005, p.101). At the summit of the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993, the criteria for admission to membership were more precisely determined: 1) political criteria – democratic political system and respect for human rights and the rights of minorities; 2) economic criteria – a market economy capable of withstanding competitive pressure within the single European market; and 3) the candidate country should agree to the obligations arising from accession – the introduction of European legislation (*acquis communautaire*) into the national law and to express its intention to join the political, economic, and monetary Union. The fourth condition refers to the EU itself, i.e., the will and ability of its members to absorb a new member. In recent years, in the context of the accession of the Balkan states, this has been the most important obstacle. Namely, the European Union did not reform its institutional system, whose foundations were defined in the 1950s by the treaties establishing the European Communities. The system at that time was relatively efficient within the Community of six member states. In today's Union of 27 members, it is becoming cumbersome and insufficiently efficient. In the European microcosm, it is believed that the institutional system would become even more cumbersome and inefficient with the admission of new members. In this context, we should keep in mind that the ordinary legislative procedure in the EU is based on the following: the Commission, as a kind of European government, drafts a legislative act which is proposed for adoption by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union. In this regard, it has been said for years that the number of members of the Commission should be reduced from the current 27 to 15 (Berramadane, Rossetto, 2017, p. 54). The European Commission should have a reasonable number of *ministries* to be able to work harmoniously and efficiently. The number of 705 members of the European Parliament is also not negligible. The most controversial is the way of taking decisions inside the Council of the European Union as the second branch of the legislature. One minister from each member state sits in it, bringing the total number of members of this body to 27.² Each minister only needs to say "good afternoon" and a few additional lines during the Council session, and discussion can be prolonged for an hour. An even bigger problem is that the Council still decides unanimously on many important areas

¹ Article 16, paragraph 2 of TEU.

(Rideau, 2002, p. 336). Consensus is present in the area of harmonization of tax laws of the member states, in decision-making in the field of foreign and security policy, but also in decisions related to the enlargement of the EU. Due to the diversity of national and state interests, reaching an agreement by the consent of all member state ministers is sometimes a *mission impossible*. The arguments against the enlargement of the European Union presented above, however, have relative force. Decisions in the field of the economy are adopted by the Council of the European Union by a qualified majority, which means that 55% of ministers voted in favor of the proposal, with the additional condition that they represent member states that have 65% of the total population of the European Union (Berramadane, Rossetto, 2017, p. 66). In addition, in practice, small and medium-sized member states suffer pressure from the big ones when making decisions or joining their positions in order to achieve a certain national interest. Membership in the European Union is achieved by going through several successive phases. A country wishing to accede must address its written request to the Council of the European Union (Article 49 of the EU Treaty). The EU Council approves the candidate status after receiving an opinion from the Commission and the European Parliament. This is followed by the opening of accession negotiations, during which the Union institutions want to make sure that the candidate has incorporated European legislation into its national legal system. Finally, an accession agreement is signed, which must be ratified by all member states and candidate countries in a referendum. This procedure has a constitutional nature and often lasts more than 10 years. The European constitutional text does not provide for an accelerated admission procedure. At the same time, Ukraine is a country burdened with problems. The aforementioned is not a fully stabilized democracy and has serious problems with corruption. Ukraine is at war with Russia, which calls into question its borders. Above all, membership in the European Union provides for collective defense solidarity in the case of an attack on one of the members of the Union. So, in the case of Ukraine's accession, the European Union would practically be at war with Russia. Some member states and the president of the European Commission believe that Ukraine should be granted candidate status. This status potentially raises the level of confrontation between the European Union and Russia and moves away from a compromise, a peaceful solution to the Ukrainian crisis. Before any decision on Ukraine's European integration, it should reach a peace agreement with Russia that would stabilize the situation in Europe.

HUMANIST EUROPE

One of the objectives of the French presidency of the European Union is to reform its institutions in order to bring them closer to its citizens. Macron insists on respecting the principle of the rule of law as a fundamental value that must prevail in all EU member states. This issue should not divide the member states, and in that sense, the conditional assistance mechanism, which is granted from European Union funds, is very important. The French President believes that there are no insurmountable differences between the old members and illiberal democracies such as Hungary, at the moment. Macron assumes that Victor Orban would accept the strengthening of the sovereignty of the European Union and a new model of economic growth.

The French President wants to encourage reflection on the common history of the European Union. Namely, according to Macron, there are not only 27 national histories of member states. Independent experts should lay the foundations for a common European history. In the context of the 35th anniversary of the Erasmus program, Emanuel Macron considers that new encouragement should be given to the educational cooperation of young people. For him, the ties between European universities should be strengthened.

CONCLUSIONS

The French presidency of the Council of the European Union was marked by two events. France was to take over this function in the midst of the national presidential election, which was held in April 2022. Considering that this event could diminish the efficiency of the presidency, some member states suggested that France change its presidency mandate to that of the country that should succeed it. At the same time, there was a danger that if Emmanuel Macron lost the presidential election in April, a new president of France who came to power would not share the same European priorities and visions as Macron. This situation occurred in 1995, when Jacques Chirac succeeded François Mitterrand in office, but it had no significant impact on France's presidency of the Council of the European Union. President Macron, however, refused to replace the presidency of the European Union, probably believing that this position would give him prestige in the election campaign. Besides the point mentioned above, it is certain that the war in Ukraine has significantly affected the French presidency of the European Union. France played a double role. On the one hand, it advocated achieving full European unity in actions towards Russia by insisting on imposing harsh economic sanctions. In the Union itself, there appeared to be divisions about the intensity

of economic sanctions against Russia. Poland and the Baltic states have called for targeting the Russian energy sector as well. Germany and France were very reluctant to restrict Russian oil and gas imports. France also insisted on sending military aid to Ukraine using funds provided from the European Union budget. At the same time, President Macron wanted to maintain a permanent dialogue with the Russian and Ukrainian presidents in order to try to contribute to finding a peaceful solution to the conflict. Macron believed that the Ukrainian crisis was the best proof that it was necessary to strengthen the military and political sovereignty of the European Union. The EU has specific interests on the world stage, separate from those of the United States. This crisis has also shown how much the European Union is dominated by the United States and NATO alliance in the military-strategic and foreign-political sense. Basically, the question is whether the geostrategic conflict between the Western alliance and Russia is in the best interests of the European Union. There are indications that a European plan for Ukraine's strict neutrality existed in 2006, which would satisfy Russia's security demands, but the United States wanted to leave the door open for Ukraine to join NATO. In any case, it is the European Union that will suffer serious economic consequences due to the crisis in Ukraine. While the war in Ukraine continues, there is also a latent danger of the outbreak of a wider military conflict on the soil of the European continent, which additionally worries the members of this supranational organization.

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