Historically, French policy towards Central Europe had three basic goals. First, it was about gaining political and economic influence in the region. It was important to win the countries of the region over to the geopolitical objectives of Paris, as well as to expand the market for French goods and investments. Second, the aim was to weaken the influence of France’s greatest rivals in the region. French support for the so-called Little Entente in the interwar period, which was primarily to weaken the Kingdom of Hungary’s efforts to revise its borders after World War I could serve as an example of this. Nevertheless, it was also supposed to indirectly limit the influence of the German Reich in the region. The aim was, therefore, a geopolitical game, which was to either weaken the cohesion within the entire region or limit the influence of rivals there, and thus reduce their potential. The third goal was to stabilize the region within a geopolitical order favouring French influence. Paris has tried many times in history to construct an international order in Europe within which France would be given a privileged place. In the event of its construction, it was important to stabilize this order. In relation to the interwar period, France supported the arrangement of the Little Entente, thus defending the then geopolitical order in Europe after the Treaty of Versailles (1919) and the treaty signed in the Palace of Grand Trianon (1920).

It seems that all these historical tendencies have been present in Emmanuel Macron’s politics. Firstly, the president has looked after French interests, both economic and geopolitical. This is evidenced by Macron’s visit to Poland in February 2020. The French wanted to interest Poles in French military weapons and nuclear technology to produce electricity[1]. At the same time, he wanted to encourage the hosts to support French ideas of deepening European integration in defence and climate policies. Poland was primarily treated as a market for French products and technology. Simultaneously, Poland was to join the French plans in European politics, even though they aroused controversy in Warsaw.

The ambitious changes in the climate policy proposed by Paris were difficult for Warsaw, because the Polish economy has been based on coal and natural gas as the main sources of energy. The transformation of the economy towards a low-emission economy would have been particularly costly for the Polish budget, domestic entrepreneurs and individual energy recipients. At the same time, the climate policy promoted by Paris in the European Union was very beneficial for France – French companies could offer countries such as Poland their technologies, including the expensive nuclear energy technology. Moreover, the burdens resulting from the climate transformation would have limited the competitiveness of the

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Polish economy, based primarily on low production costs. It was therefore beneficial for the French economy, which rivalled Polish enterprises on the internal market.

In the case of EU defence policy, France’s goal for years has been to support the development of an arms industry cartel built around French and German companies[2]. Simultaneously, it has been aimed at facilitating the sale of weapons produced by this cartel on the EU internal market, and at the same time hindering access to this market for weapons manufactured outside the EU, especially in the USA. Poland, as one of the largest arms importers in the European Union, was an obvious target for such a policy. The aim of Macron’s visit to Warsaw was to increase the possibilities of purchasing French weapons in this country. On the other hand, the European regulations proposed by Paris were to force the opening of the public procurement market in EU countries, including Central Europe, and at the same time to impede access to them for American weapons. It should be recalled that the Polish government signed a $4.6 billion deal to buy 32 F-35 fighters from the U.S. in 2020, and in 2018 spent $4.75 billion on U.S.-made Patriot anti-missile batteries. Warsaw has also pushed hard to have U.S. troops permanently stationed on Polish soil[3]. Poland and the rest of Central Europe, however, were perceived more as a sales market rather than as a partner in geopolitical relations. The French vision for relations with Central Europe was therefore asymmetric in nature and therefore unilaterally beneficial for France.

Macron, who declared in 2019: “What we are currently experiencing is the brain death of NATO” in the era of Donald Trump, has been trying to find a new geopolitical balance for the EU that relies less on American power. That meant ensuring cordial ties with Russia, but also beefing up European defence capabilities. The effort gained new urgency in the wake of Brexit, where the U.K. remained a NATO ally but was no longer part of any EU defence initiatives. Although Macron tried to convince Poland to reconcile with Russia, he did so without faith in success. During a visit to Warsaw, he called for a “new architecture of confidence and security” in Europe that includes Russia, because “when I look at a map (…) we see that Russia is in Europe”[4]. On this key issue, however, it was difficult to find an agreement between the French president and the authorities in Warsaw. That is why Macron preferred to talk to Chancellor Merkel and directly with Vladimir Putin about the EU’s eastern policy. Central Europe was only supposed to be a silent witness to these arrangements and then to implement them.

France treated the policies of the European Union as a platform for pursuing French economic and geopolitical interests. In the case of the economy, it was about

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shaping the EU regulations in particular areas in such a way that it would be the most beneficial for French producers, and at the same time burdening partners from other countries, including new EU members from Central Europe, with costs. Apart from the climate policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy, the internal market policy should be mentioned. Macron initiated a project to limit the arrival of posted workers from Central Europe to France, which was one of his greatest election promises in the 2017 presidential campaign[5]. That is why he promoted the change of the European regulation concerning these employees. The aim was to make their financial benefits equal to those of local workers, thus increasing the costs of posting workers from Central Europe. This led to a reduction in the influx of cheaper, and therefore more competitive, labour from this region to Western European countries.

The proposed directive was therefore unfavourable for the countries of Central Europe and for the economic model prevailing in those countries that based their competitiveness on low production and service costs. Macron’s goal was to limit the power of Central European economies in the EU internal market through regulatory changes. Thus, competitiveness was no longer determined by market forces, but by political power in relation to enacting top-down legislation. To this end, Macron mobilized a coalition of countries from the western part of the EU which could vote against opponents from Central Europe. In addition, he decided to divide Central Europe itself. To achieve this, he made a tour of the countries of Central Europe in the summer of 2017 in order to gain favour towards the draft amendment to the Posted Workers Directive. Simultaneously, he intentionally bypassed Poland – a great opponent of French plans in the matter. The tactic of “divide and rule” (or “divide et impera”) in relation to Central Europe was successful as some countries of this region supported the French proposals. The regulation was adopted by majority vote in the Council in 2018. Poland and Hungary voted against the final adoption of the directive. Latvia, Lithuania, Croatia and the United Kingdom abstained.

The aim of French policy was therefore to break the unity of Central Europe, as long as it was united against the interests of France in European politics. Another challenge was the weakening of German influence in the region. Germany was an indispensable ally in Paris’ European policy, but it increasingly exceeded France’s geopolitical potential, especially economically. An important consequence of the growing power of Germany were disputes between Paris and Berlin about the future of integration, and more precisely Berlin’s assertiveness towards some French

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proposals. Therefore, the aim of French diplomacy was not only to win Germany over to French ideas, but also to try to limit its political base, especially if it could be mobilized against Paris.

Central Europe has been perceived for many years not only as an important reservoir of Berlin’s economic power, but also as a group of allies for German policy in Brussels. Paris used this opportunity to weaken Germany’s allies in European politics. It was the dispute over the rule of law in the EU, in which Hungary and Poland, and soon Bulgaria, were accused of violating EU values. Paris usually stigmatized these countries for their actions in domestic politics, as well as demanded sanctions from the EU. The aim was not only to support European values, which in the EU were usually interpreted liberally, i.e. in a way proximate to Macron. It seems to have been more important to drive a wedge in the political cooperation between Germany and Central European countries, thus limiting the possibility of Berlin using the support of its usual allies. This was above all visible in relation to Viktor Orbán, whose Fidesz party was in the same European political group as the German Christian Democrats of Chancellor Angela Merkel.

The governments of Hungary and Poland, discredited in the European arena, were losing their credibility and influence as potential allies of Berlin. This was especially true when there were additional disputes between them, as it was the case between the Polish and German governments after 2015. It is worth noting that it was also about discrediting the governments of Central Europe, which have repeatedly opposed French ideas about the future of the EU. Poland, together with Hungary, the Czech Republic and Estonia blocked the attempt to move for zero emissions by 2050 at an EU summit in June 2019. In response to this, in one of his interviews, the French President criticized Poland for blocking the fight against the climate change. He also told young people to travel to Poland to voice their protest[6].

In Macron’s policy, the dominant game was to divide Central Europe or weaken it, for example as a result of criticizing the violation of the rule of law and *democratic backsliding.* In one of his interviews with the French weekly Le Point, Macron said that the policies of the Polish government undermine the rule of law and that Poland does not speak for all of Eastern Europe[7]. It was about breaking the cohesion of Central Europe, which was against French goals in European politics. It was similar in the case of migration policy. Macron said EU countries that fail to show solidarity on migration should be kicked out of the passport-free Schengen area. “*Countries that don’t want more Frontex or solidarity will leave Schengen. Countries that don’t want more Europe will no longer touch structural funds*,” he said[8]. Simultaneously,

in relation to the intransigent position of the Visegrad Group states, he said that he would not "*cede any ground to nationalists and those who advocate hate speech*."[9]

Thus, regional cooperation in Central Europe was treated by Paris as a threat, not an opportunity for French diplomacy. Only to a slight extent were attempts made to win the favour of the countries of this region, not to mention more permanent allied relations. There was a game aimed at weakening Berlin's potential allies, or opponents to Paris' initiatives. All this indicated that the countries of the region in question were not treated seriously as serious players and partners of French diplomacy. Even if Paris was trying to get these countries on its side, these were either ad hoc initiatives, as in the case of the Posted Workers Directive, or the political benefits offered to the countries of Central Europe were limited to empty declarations and little meaningful gestures. French politicians noticed the development of Central European economies as well as their growing importance in international politics. For example, it was difficult to implement the French policy aimed at rapprochement with Russia or increasing Europe's strategic autonomy towards the US in spite of Poland and other countries in the region. Nevertheless, it did not fundamentally change Macron's course towards the discussed part of the EU.

Macron's policy towards Central Europe was dominated by a pragmatic approach. The region was, first of all, an increasingly developing market for French goods and services. Potentially, it could also support French ideas about the future of European integration. The problem was that many of Macron's proposals were supposed to improve the situation in France at the expense of Central European countries. This was the case with migration policy, climate policy and with regard to Posted Workers Directive. Since the Central European countries were not enthusiastic about French ideas, they had to be punished by either being stigmatised for violating the rule of law or by being threatened with withdrawal of EU funds. Macron has repeatedly criticized "illiberal" forces in Eastern Europe and suggested that they used Europe as a "supermarket". "*Europe is a common destiny. It is weakened when it accepts its principles being rejected. The countries in Europe that don't respect the rules should have to face the political consequences. And that's not just an East-West debate*."[10]

Another way to weaken the role of this region in the EU was through ideas of multispeed Europe. French president has made it clear he favours a multispeed Europe based on deepening integration among Eurozone members, going as far as

having a separate Eurozone budget, finance minister and parliament. That could mean less cash and influence for eastern countries like Poland which do not use the common currency[11]. Such an approach resulted from underestimating the potential of Central Europe and quite a disrespectful attitude towards the new member states among the French elite.

Therefore, Macron’s policy brought about only short-term benefits. It is certainly difficult to talk about a good and lasting alliance between France and the region. Sometimes there was even a cooling down of mutual relations, as was the case with relations between Paris and Warsaw after 2015. This translated into a freezing by the French of cooperation within the Weimar Triangle, that is, between France, Germany and Poland. Another effect of Paris’ attitude was the growing tensions and divisions between the western and eastern parts of the EU. Macron had no problem limiting integration to the Western European core of the founding states of the European Communities. This was the purpose of proposals for deepening integration within the euro area[12]. Concurrently, Berlin has prevented these fractures only to a limited extent. Admittedly, Angela Merkel did not want to deepen integration in the euro area, and thus the division into two-speed Europe. Nevertheless, she succumbed to the political rhetoric coming from Paris, which essentially contributed to the splitting up of the two parts of the EU. In this way, instead of stabilizing the geopolitical order in the EU, Macron’s policy contributed to its decomposition.

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