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Eastern Europe Studies Centre

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# **THE EUROPEAN AGENDA UNDER THE FRENCH PRESIDENCY OF THE EU COUNCIL:**

## PARIS' PRIORITIES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR LITHUANIA

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## Summary:

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- The European Commission has recently presented its agenda for 2022, with plans to conclude the negotiations on key climate and digital policy initiatives and launch new cooperation projects in defence, foreign, and industrial policy.
  - Much of this work will be coordinated by France, which will hold the Presidency of the Council of the European Union in January-July 2022. Since 2017, global trends have brought the EU consensus on such issues as defence and trade closer to France's long-standing positions, and France's President Emmanuel Macron will undoubtedly seek to capitalize on this during Paris' Presidency of the Council.
  - France's behaviour at the helm of the Presidency will also be shaped by the upcoming national elections (in April-June 2022), as Macron attempts to secure a second term in office. The election increases the likelihood of politicization of European policymaking and integration and puts pressure on Macron to deliver tangible results relevant to his voters.
  - In this context, France is likely to push for the approval of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism and the Digital Markets Act proposed by the Commission, for strengthening the external EU borders, as well as for institutionalising the twin logic of "strategic autonomy" and "European sovereignty" in the implementation of the EU Strategic Compass.
  - Lithuanian decision makers should not only identify the opportunities for constructive involvement in Paris' agenda, but also must be prepared for how it will be affected by the politicisation of European integration in France.
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# Introduction

By early 2022, Europe will have been battling the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated economic crisis for two years. During this time, the European Union (EU) has also been increasingly affected by long-term global and often destabilising trends, such as technological transformation, geopolitical shifts, and climate change. Interacting and intersecting in various ways, these trends are transforming the political debates in European societies, contributing to the politicisation of EU policies and opening space for new political leaders, coalitions, or directions to emerge.

In this highly complex context, on 15 October 2021, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen gave her annual State of the European Union (SOTEU) address, outlining her vision of the EU agenda for the coming year<sup>1</sup>. The main initiatives on the agenda address the aforementioned challenges: the Commission will seek to strengthen climate change management and digital market regulation instruments, promote EU security integration, and contribute to the ongoing citizens' dialogue on the Future of Europe.

Many of these initiatives will be coordinated by France, which will hold the Presidency of the Council of the European Union from January to July 2022. Although the rotating presidency has lost much of its agenda-setting power after the Treaty of Lisbon formalized the role of the European Council, it can still play an important role in EU policymaking when held by a major EU state. Moreover, France may exercise more power over the European Council itself, given that Angela Merkel's retirement has left Macron the EU's most visible and decisive leader. France is thus particularly well-positioned to exert influence over the EU policymaking when at the helm of the Council.

As such, Paris will be an especially important partner for Vilnius in its effort to contribute to the formation and implementation of EU policies. This study analyses which of the French presidency priorities are most relevant to Lithuania's interests, what opportunities for constructive cooperation can be identified, where the risks of disagreement and divergence lie, and how all of this may be affected by the politicisation of the EU because of the upcoming national elections in France.

The discussion is divided into three sections. The first briefly presents the most important items on the EU policy agenda for 2022. The second discusses the priorities of the French presidency of the Council of the EU and analyses the factors that shape France's positions and that may influence its behaviour during the presidency. The last section considers how Lithuania can engage France to pursue mutually beneficial cooperation, concluding with recommendations for decision makers.

# 1. EU Agenda for 2022

As the current Commission will be halfway through its term next year, most of its agenda for 2022 focuses on the implementation of the policy initiatives introduced in the previous two years. Accordingly, the present section analyses the Commission's plans for 2022 in the context of the overarching priorities for the 2019-2024 EU policy cycle.

**In general, the Commission's agenda promises continuity while placing great emphasis on the external dimension of European policy.** The very first issue mentioned in the SOTEU – European health policy – is a case in point. In line with the promises made in 2020, the Commission will continue to strengthen the EU's preparedness for future pandemics next year: the Commission will launch its European Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority as well as promote investments into healthcare system preparedness and resilience. The key priority, however, will be to accelerate the global vaccination effort, and the Commission plans to donate 200 million additional doses for low- and medium-income countries. Below, I examine how the twin focus on continuity and external dimension of EU policy will define the Commission's work in 2022 as von der Leyen ramps up efforts to deliver on her promise of a 'green, digital, and geopolitical' Europe.

## 1.1 Working towards a green, digital, and geopolitical Europe in 2022

Fighting climate change has been the main priority area for the EU political cycle of 2019-2024 from the very start, when von der Leyen announced the pledge to achieve climate neutrality by 2050. To achieve this goal, the Commission launched the European Green Deal, a complex set of climate policy initiatives covering emissions reduction, green transition, renewable energy, circular economy promotion, biodiversity protection, and other issues. **The Commission will continue with the implementation of the European Green Deal in 2022**, paying special attention to member states' concerns about the costs of the green transition on vulnerable social groups, the competitiveness of European businesses, and the role of the EU on the global stage.

To keep Europe on track for climate neutrality by 2050, the Commission has set the intermediate goal of reducing emissions by 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels.<sup>2</sup> In July 2021, the Commission announced the first set of initiatives for implementing the 2030 climate change policy plan, which includes measures to increase energy efficiency and to review energy taxation and forestry policies<sup>3</sup>. However, the most intensive debates between EU capitals, members of the European Parliament (MEPs), and European interest groups were sparked by two proposals:

- **Reform the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS).** The ETS, which is based on the 'cap and trade'<sup>4</sup> principle, covers around 45% of the EU's greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. To achieve the goals of the 2030 plan, the Commission has proposed expanding the ETS into the maritime sector and creating an analogous carbon trading system for transport and housing sectors. Many member states and MEPs expressed their concern that such reforms would increase fuel and heating prices, which would disproportionately affect low and middle-income consumers<sup>5</sup>. Understanding this challenge, the Commission announced it would establish a Social Climate Fund to provide member states with 72.2 billion EUR during 2025-2032 to ameliorate the impact of the planned changes.<sup>6</sup>
- **Create a carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM).**<sup>7</sup> The Commission proposed this instrument to fight carbon leakage – that is, imports of goods whose production generates high GHG emissions from countries with climate regulations that are not as stringent as those in the EU – and to help European companies maintain their competitiveness. In its first phase, this me-

chanism will apply to cement, steel, aluminium, fertilizer, and energy sectors. Since its proposal, the CBAM caused significant concern within the EU due to its disproportionate effect on member states in the periphery. As EU trading partners may accuse Brussels of protectionism and apply countermeasures, the instrument also brings the external dimension of European climate policy to the forefront.<sup>8</sup>

Both proposals will be considered in Council committees and in the EP in 2022 and are expected to be revised extensively before final approval.

**The second priority on the Commission's agenda – facilitating Europe's digital transition – is closely related to the first.** Indeed, EU policymakers often speak of the "twin transition," whereby the shift to the green economy and digitization are seen as distinct but related and complementary processes.<sup>9</sup> The growing digital sector can create new opportunities for workers in the traditional industries that may be affected by the green transition, and thus offset some of the impact of this process. Advanced green technologies, meanwhile, are expected to help achieve climate target – though, of course, only if the digital sector itself follows the principles of the green economy.

**Beyond contributing to the green transition, managing digitization is also critical to the Commission's effort to promote 'European sovereignty.'** Specifically, given the crucial role of digital technologies in contemporary politics and the outsize influence of the US and China in the digital sector, the EU's ability to act as an autonomous power is thought to depend on its capacity to develop critical technologies at home and to promote European standards for technology use, data protec-

tion, and privacy abroad. For this reason, the Commission initiated a wide-ranging review into the EU's single market, innovation, industrial, competition, and cyber security policies. In 2022, the Commission is expected to continue with the implementation of these initiatives, focusing on three areas in particular:

- **Setting ethical and security standards in the digital markets.** In 2022, the EU will continue active discussions on two parallel initiatives from the Commission: The Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act, which would set certain transparency, accountability, and risk mitigation standards for companies providing digital services and developing AI technologies, respectively. Although the Council of the EU supports both of the initiatives in principle, resolving complex issues regarding their scope and implementation will require extensive policy deliberation. The Commission also plans to present the European Cyber Resilience Act, which would set uniform cyber security requirements for products sold in the EU.
- **Reviewing competition policy in the digital sector.** In 2022, the Commission will seek to enshrine into law measures to regulate the behaviour of major digital platforms. Known as the Digital Markets Act (DMA), the initiative has spurred a lot of disagreement between Member States on whether the proposed measures should apply only to US tech giants, what obligations should be imposed on the companies subject to the act, and what role member states should play in implementing them.
- **Developing European technology capacities.** In her SOTEU address, von der Leyen announced the latest EU digital policy initiative, the European Chips Act, which will

be formally presented in the second quarter of 2022. Semiconductors, or chips, is one of the key enabling technologies for digitisation, and the EU considers securing reliable semiconductor supply as an essential condition for fostering innovation in Europe and for the EU's capacity to expand into new markets in the digital economy. Citing the EU's current dependence on imports of chips manufactured in Asia, the Commission proposed the Act to promote the development and manufacturing of semiconductors in Europe by mobilising public investment and enhancing cooperation between science and business.

All three initiatives have implications for the external EU relations, each seeks to redraw the relations of asymmetrical interdependence with the US and China, which themselves are gearing up for the battle for dominance over the new technology markets. In this context, the new transatlantic format of the Trade and Technology Council suggests that the EU and the US seek to not only institutionalise their cooperation in the area of digital policy but also forge a unified response to Beijing's actions. However, there is still considerable divergence between Washington and certain EU capitals on issues regarding the regulation and taxation of digital platforms, which hinder the development of a comprehensive joint EU-US approach to digital policy.

Given the emphasis on the global dimension of European policies, it seems only natural that **the Commission's agenda for 2022 includes an ambitious set of foreign and defence policy initiatives.** Admittedly, von der Leyen's efforts to lead a 'geopolitical Commission' have so far yielded only limited results, being hampered both by the uncertainty in transatlantic relations during the presidency

of Donald Trump and the Covid-19 crisis. In 2021, however, the Commission has presented several important documents on the EU's global policy, including a new US-EU Agenda for Global Change following Joe Biden's victory in the US presidential elections and the EU's new Indo-Pacific strategy.

These documents put forward the Commission's twofold ambition of strengthening the EU's role in the transatlantic security architecture while also seeking more active engagement outside this framework. The Commission's 2022 agenda promises continuity, as the key initiatives of next year will also focus either on further EU defence policy integration, or on developing old and new international partnerships.

- **Strengthening collective security and interoperability inside the EU.** In her SOTEU address, von der Leyen emphasised that the EU's common defence policy so far has been hampered not only by insufficient material capabilities, but also by a lack of political will and agreement on common interests and priorities. Accordingly, in 2022, the Commission will present the long-anticipated EU Strategic Compass and hold a defence summit during the French presidency of the EU. Within the scope of these initiatives, the Commission may present other proposals mentioned in the SOTEU, such as presenting guidelines for security and defence technology, and/or tax measures to incentivize purchases of defence technology manufactured in Europe.
- **Expanding international partnerships and areas of global cooperation.** During her SOTEU address, von der Leyen promised to present a new EU-NATO Joint Declaration before the end of 2021; the Commission

work programme for 2022 also includes an announcement regarding a strategic partnership with the Persian Gulf region. Notably, the Commission will also present a new connectivity strategy for the EU's participation in the international transport infrastructure development. Called "Global Gateway," the Commission's proposal is understood as an indirect answer to China's Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>10</sup> Complementary to the focus on connectivity, the 2022 agenda also includes a new international energy strategy and the renewal of the ocean management action plan.

## 1.2 Tackling the persistent challenges to the EU

In addition to the policies related to von der Leyen's agenda for a "green, digital, and geopolitical" Europe, the Commission will also tackle some of the long-standing challenges facing the EU, related to the economy, migration, and values (namely, democracy, rule of law, and individual rights). These issues have long divided the bloc into several partially overlapping but deeply opposed camps. Three wide-ranging and complex discussions in each of these areas await the EU in 2022.

- **First, the Commission plans to renew discussions on the EU's fiscal rules and economic governance.** The Commission aims to lead the Economic Governance Review and encourage member states to develop a consensus on the possible modifications to the Stability and Growth Pact. Although these discussions are only preliminary in nature, it is important for the Commission that an agreement is reached by 2023, when the EU's fiscal policy rules, suspended during the crisis, are set to be renewed.

- Second, the Commission will call on member states and the EP to approve the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. The new impetus to reform the EU's migration policy stems from the expiration of the EU-Turkey migration deal in March 2021, the concern about new refugee flows following the collapse of the Afghan government, and the instrumentalization of refugees and migrants by the Lukashenko regime in a hybrid attack against eastern EU member states. **Having proposed a new draft of the pact on migration in 2020, the Commission will seek to accelerate the negotiations on its approval and, possibly, to amend it** in response to the issues that gained relevance during the recent crises.
- Third, in the spring of 2022, the Commission and the Council of the EU will conclude the Conference on the Future of Europe. Questions related to the protection of **human rights and democracy in the EU are likely to feature prominently in the outcomes of the Conference**, due in part to their salience with the young people that form the Conference's target demographic. This could fuel the ongoing debates on the rule of law and institutional reform between EU member states and the Commission, further contributing to the politicization of European integration and the EU as a polity.

The economy, migration, and values will also feature in multiple other formats. For example, the Commission will further address the issue of values in its 2022 Rule of Law report, which may further intensify the ongoing conflict between the Commission and Poland and Hungary. Although the Commission has so far been relatively cautious the pressure from the EP and Benelux countries, and the change of leadership in Berlin may make von der Leyen adapt stricter measures against Warsaw and Budapest, with highly uncertain potential political implications.

Certainly, the Commission's agenda for 2022 is subject to potential disruption and significant change. This is not only due to the high probability of various unexpected events but also because the European agenda will also be shaped by the priorities of the Council of the EU. The latter concern is particularly relevant given that, in the first half of 2022, the rotating presidency of the Council will be held by one of the most powerful and ambitious EU member states – France. The priorities of the French presidency and its implications on the EU's 2022 agenda will be discussed in the next section.

## 2. Priorities of the French presidency of the Council of the EU

The broad priorities of the French presidency of the Council were outlined back in November 2020, when France's Secretary of State for European Affairs Clément Beaune presented a statement to the cabinet on this topic.<sup>11</sup> The statement described **France's agenda for the EU presidency in three words: 'recovery, power, and belonging.'**<sup>12</sup> While the first keyword clearly refers to the recent crisis experience, the latter two cover the two key dimensions of Macron's vision of "European sovereignty," which he introduced in 2017 and has promoted ever since.<sup>13</sup>

To Macron, sovereignty requires both the capacity to act autonomously ('strategic autonomy,' in this respect, is one dimension of 'European sovereignty') and the sense of a political community. The policymakers interviewed for this study confirmed that 'sovereignty,' so conceived, will be the foundational idea underpinning France's agenda during its presidency.

While the three keywords indicate the broad political goals for the French presidency, Paris' policy agenda is best understood as covering two major workstreams. **First, Paris will focus on the EU legislative initiatives that closely align with France's political goals and could already be adopted during its presidency,** such as the Digital Markets Act. **Second, France will seek to build on the results of the Conference on the Future of Europe to identify and propose projects that would help to 'create Europe of the future,'** focusing in particular on the European identity and culture.<sup>14</sup> In both short-term and long-term policy debates, France is also likely to focus on strategic autonomy, migration, climate, and rule of law: in March 2021, the French Senate picked these topics as the four major themes for the inter-parliamentary dimension of the presidency.<sup>15</sup>

France appears well-positioned to pursue its vision of 'European sovereignty' and the attendant policy priorities. First, as the French themselves

have noted, the concept of 'sovereignty' has lately been widely adopted by the EU institutions and is increasingly accepted by other member governments.<sup>16</sup> Second, **France's calls to increase the autonomy of European industry and defence policy are directly reflected in the Commission's 2022 agenda.** It may also be argued that global events – such as the turbulence in transatlantic relations during the Trump presidency, China's aggressive expansionism, the paralysis of global value chains during the pandemic, and the West's chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan – have brought the rest of the EU closer to France.<sup>17</sup> Paris, of course, was no passive observer in this process and actively pressured the Commission to include projects that promote the goal of 'sovereignty' in its 2022 agenda, such as, for example, the summit on European defence policy, which von der Leyen announced in the SOTEU.

Whether France can take advantage of the opportunities presented by these shifts in the EU will depend considerably on the how Paris' priorities and behaviour will be affected by three factors. **The first is France's upcoming national election.** Macron may face close to some thirty candidates in the presidential election in April 2022, with his 2017 opponent Marine Le Pen and the far-right figure Éric Zemmour currently seen as his main contenders. With Macron expected to compete with a Eurosceptic challenger in the second round, Europe is all but certain to again be a central topic of the elections.

This may affect the French presidency of the Council in two ways. First, as Beaune himself admitted, Paris will *de facto* have only three productive months of work before the elections start. Second, since Macron's influence in Europe plays an important function in legi-

timating his leadership at home, he feels pressure to deliver tangible EU policy results as quickly as possible to be able to communicate them during his campaign. In this respect, Macron sees the impending politicisation of the EU as both an opportunity and a threat. On the one hand, Macron understands that most EU leaders hope for his victory against Le Pen or Zemmour. As such, the incumbent president may strategically politicise certain issues and raise voter expectations regarding certain EU policy initiatives, thus 'binding his hands' and exploiting this fact to exact concessions from other EU capitals during Council negotiations. If, on the other hand, politicisation about a certain issue is bottom-up or is strategically initiated by his opponents, Macron may find himself forced to seek quick compromises with the EU institutions and capitals to achieve any agreement that could help him neutralize the issue. The issues of migration and social policy, which French voters see as the key challenges for France and Europe, are particularly suitable for such politicization. Further, the ongoing conflict between the Commission and Poland over the rule-of-law concerns may also give Macron's opponents an opportunity to politicise the issue European values.

**The second factor that has affected and will continue affect the French presidency of the Council is the state of transatlantic relations and, especially, the development of bilateral US-France relations.** Macron has on many occasions criticised the dynamics within NATO, going so far as to pronounce the alliance 'brain-dead'.<sup>18</sup> The president's criticism reflects two broad concerns about transatlantic cooperation. First, Macron believes that NATO allies can no longer rely on the leadership of the US and, at the same time,

have neither the capacity nor the willingness to take more of a lead in ensuring security in Europe. Second, Macron is sharply critical of Turkey's behaviour within the Alliance and has complained that many NATO allies were too soft on Erdoğan's regime.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the fact that Joe Biden has expressed firm commitment to the transatlantic partnership, France's Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly stressed that the US's strategic interest 'has structurally moved to Asia' and that NATO members in Europe must therefore make a more active effort to ensure their own security and increase their defence spending.<sup>20</sup> Beyond simply noting Washington's shifting geopolitical orientation, Paris is deeply critical of the way the US has handled this process, slamming both the US failure to coordinate the withdrawal from Afghanistan with its European allies and Washington's secret deal to sell nuclear-powered submarines to Canberra, signed as part of the new security alliance between Australia, the UK and the US (AUKUS).

Relations with Ankara also remain a sensitive issue for Paris. After Erdoğan declared his support for a two-state solution for Cyprus during his visit to the island, France's foreign minister accused him of provocation and of trying to sabotage the international efforts to reunify the island.<sup>21</sup> Only a few months later, France signed a historic defence pact with Greece, whereby both parties agreed to assist one another in the event of aggression from a third party, even if the latter is a NATO ally; Athens also agreed to purchase three French frigates worth about 5bn Euro. Ankara has condemned the pact as directed against Turkey and harmful to the entire Alliance, but has so far not taken any concrete action in response.

This tense dynamic within NATO notwithstanding, it is important to note that Washington reacted to the criticism from Paris after the AUKUS pact promptly and positively, which has allowed for a normalisation of the bilateral relations. Biden and Macron also held a meeting at the end of October, which became the basis for a joint US-France statement detailing the agenda of their bilateral relations.<sup>22</sup> Notably, the statement mentions Washington's support for a stronger European defence policy that 'is complementary to NATO' and includes the commitment by the US to increase cooperation in the Sahel region. France, for its part, promises to keep the US closely informed of its priorities as it takes over the Council presidency.

It can thus be argued that France was able to turn the crisis in the bilateral relationship into an opportunity to pressure Washington to accommodate some of Paris' key priorities. The US support for a stronger EU defence policy, as Lithuanian decision-makers interviewed for the study have stressed, should empower France's ambition to accelerate the process of EU defence integration in pursuit of 'strategic autonomy.' Yet concerns about the future of the US-France relations remain, adding to the uncertainty regarding the course of the French Council presidency.

**The last factor that could significantly affect the French presidency of the Council is the change in Germany's European policy under the new government in Berlin.** Indeed, even if the new government, led by the Social Democrat Chancellor Olaf Scholz, promises little change in substantive policy (Scholz was Angela Merkel's vice-chancellor and campaigned as a continuity candidate), Merkel's departure may nevertheless impact the so-called "Franco-German engine" of European

integration.<sup>23</sup> Throughout her chancellorship, Merkel also steadily prioritised an inclusive – even if less ambitious – mode of integration, which provided a counterbalance to the ‘coalitions of the willing’ approach traditionally favoured by France and championed by Macron.<sup>24</sup> Although Berlin’s stance was influenced by structural factors (e.g., Germany’s interdependence with Central-Eastern European markets), Merkel’s personal leadership style and close ties between the Christian Democrats and other centre-right parties in Europe also played a part. Moreover, the new “traffic-light” coalition promised to favour the community method in EU policymaking and seek institutional reform, signifying a real break from Angela Merkel’s preference for inter-governmental coordination.

In terms of substantive policy, the future points of convergence and conflict between France and Germany are still difficult to predict, as a lot depends on the power dynamics within the “traffic-light” coalition. For example, the two junior coalition partners – the liberal Free Democrats and the Greens – diverge sharply on the questions of eurozone reform and on industrial policy, both of which count as traditional priorities for France (in both cases, Paris is closer to the Greens).<sup>25</sup> While all three coalition partners support a stronger European foreign policy and deeper defence integration, including the shift to majority vote on foreign and security policy issues at the Council, the Social Democrats and the Greens are not prepared to increase Germany’s defence budget or develop EU military capabilities (which France demands). Thus, perhaps the only area where Macron and Scholz should be in firm agreement is human rights, democracy, and the rule-of-law, as every party in Germany’s ruling coalition

has stressed that the Commission’s efforts to defend the EU’s fundamental values have so far been insufficient.<sup>26</sup>

Here, however, Macron’s electoral concerns may prevent him matching Germany’s newfound ambitions to tackle the rule-of-law controversy. When EU leaders discussed the Polish Constitutional Tribunal’s decision that European law has no primacy over national law during the last meeting of the European Council, both Merkel and Macron were pushing for dialogue with Warsaw rather than any punitive actions towards it. Prior to the meeting, both also held bilateral discussions with the Polish prime minister. Macron’s emphasis on dialogue with Poland is in line with the broader trend of the president shifting closer to positions commonly associated with the Eurosceptic right – e.g., a firm stance on migration and scepticism regarding the integration of Muslim minorities – as the election season approaches.

The foregoing analysis of the political context surrounding the French presidency of the Council suggests that Paris will simultaneously face pressure to quickly deliver tangible policy results and navigate deep uncertainty about the long-term future of the EU and its global role. Below, these two insights are explored in greater depth, focusing on the likely priorities and initiatives of the French presidency.

## 2.1 Striving for fast results: the drive to deliver on EU legislation

The first axis of the French Council presidency is completing the EU legislative processes already underway, prioritising the initiatives in line with Paris’ political goals. Due to the

upcoming election, it is important for Macron to deliver as many concrete policy results as possible. In this context, France is most likely to focus on climate, digital, and migration policy areas.

### *Climate policy: the social dimension and nuclear energy*

Macron has made climate policy central to his presidency from the very start of his term when he launched his famous Make Our Planet Great Again scholarship programme for climate scientists. Preparing for his re-election campaign, Macron revealed that half of his France 2030 investment plan, which totals 30bn euros, would be used to fund the ecological transition.<sup>27</sup> Notably, Macron also consistently emphasized the external dimension of his climate policy: upon assuming office, the president demanded that future EU trade agreements include a commitment to follow the Paris Climate Accord; every year, France directs 7bn euro to fund climate transition in the most vulnerable countries.

As such, during its Council presidency, France can be expected to actively push for the approval of the carbon border adjustment mechanism. CBAM has broad support among French parties and is consistent with the country's broader trade policy approach, notable for the preference to use trade defence instruments to further France's strategic and political goals.<sup>28</sup> In addition to its support for CBAM, **Paris also plans to propose that, by 2030, the EU should stop imports of commodities whose production contributes to deforestation.**<sup>29</sup>

It should be noted, however, that France's support for the Commission's climate agenda is not without qualifications. Macron's main

reservation has to do with the Commission's proposal to extend the principles of the EU ETS to transport and buildings, which French MEP Pascal Canfin called 'a political suicide.'<sup>30</sup> France insists that the Social Climate Fund proposed by the Commission (which Paris supports in principle) does little to mitigate the negative impact of the proposal on the middle class, which would be significantly affected. Consequently, **one may expect France to demand a more ambitious compensatory package for middle-class consumers and, if it fails to secure it, to block the proposal of extending the EU ETS.**

Lastly, France, along with ten other member states, has pushed the Commission to include nuclear energy into the so-called 'climate taxonomy' that sets the guidelines for 'green funding.'<sup>31</sup> While nuclear power is an important source of energy in France, Macron's support for nuclear energy is a relatively new phenomenon.<sup>32</sup> This shift was likely due to the growing EU-wide concerns about the costs of the ecological transition, exacerbated especially during the ongoing energy price crisis.<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that Macron also links nuclear energy with the effort to strengthen Europe's energy security and sovereignty. Judging from a set of leaked documents, the Commission appears poised to include both nuclear energy and natural gas in the climate taxonomy.<sup>34</sup> If this does not happen by the end of the year (as France demands), Paris will certainly escalate this issue during its Council presidency; if the Commission agrees to amend the taxonomy, France will strive to secure the needed support in the Council as soon as possible.

### *Digital policy: stricter rules and greater centralisation*

Already as the minister of the economy, Macron emphasised the need to prepare both the French and European economy for the digital age. After becoming president, Macron embedded his digital agenda in his broader vision of 'European sovereignty', thus raising the importance of digital policy to a new, strategic level. Specifically, Paris promised to adopt a stricter stance on big tech, such as taxing the large technology multinationals in the countries where they operate and not their countries of origin or committing them to certain data protection, content control, and competition regulation.

Accordingly, **France is one of the most active supporters of the DMA and the DSA** and is expected to pursue their adoption during its Council presidency. The negotiations among member states are currently nearing a compromise.<sup>35</sup> Although the request by France, Germany, and the Netherlands to strengthen the role of national competition authorities in implementing the DMA was rejected, **Paris seems to have accepted the Commission's central role in implementing the DMA** to get the act adopted. In face of the resistance by some member states to tax digital platforms in the countries where they operate (and not their countries of origin), **France has also proposed a compromise version of the DSA, whereby the Commission (and neither the country of origin, nor the country of operation) is assigned with the role of regulating the behaviour of the largest digital platforms.**

As the proposals must also be endorsed by the European Parliament, many MEPs support even stricter tech regulations than the Commission or most member states. As such, it is

likely that the start of the trilateral dialogue will also strengthen France's position in the Council; **one can thus expect close coordination between the Macron administration and French MEPs** to ensure both high ambition and the ultimate approval of the legal acts during the French presidency. The rest of the Commission's digital policy initiatives, such as the Chips Act and the Cyber Resilience Acts, are to be presented only in the second half of 2022.

### *Migration policy: further integration of external EU borders*

During the 2017 presidential election, Macron made a point to stress the positive impact of migration and France's commitment to the right of asylum. While Macron has not abandoned these positions altogether, his stance on the issues of migration – as is the case with most other EU member governments – has become notably and openly more stringent, and the president does not hesitate to exhibit his determination to control migration as the 2022 election approaches. This trend became particularly apparent during the 2019 municipal elections, on the eve of which Macron announced planned restrictions on the provision of non-essential medical services to refugees as well as annual quotas for immigrant visas.<sup>36</sup>

During its presidency of the Council, France will also seek to make progress in the area of European migration policy. Given the salience of migration in France's domestic politics, Macron knows that even more limited breakthroughs, focused on specific issues in migration control, can be used effectively in his campaign. Thus, although Paris recognizes a comprehensive agreement on the Commission's New Pact on Migration and Asylum (which it supports) is likely beyond reach du-

ring the presidency, policymakers interviewed for this study confirmed that France would be content with and intent on making gradual progress on migration.

Certainly, one cannot rule out the possibility that France will pursue a more ambitious agenda on migration, especially as Paris plans to host a summit on the Schengen area reform as soon as late January.<sup>37</sup> However, given the time constraints Macron faces, France is more likely to focus on more limited policy initiatives with greater potential for quick results. As became evident during the 2015-2016 migrant and refugee crisis, one issue with a broad voter appeal and sufficient levels of agreement among member states is the protection of the EU's external borders. As the recent incidents at the Greek, Latvian, Polish, and Lithuanian borders in 2021 again brought the issue to the forefront, Paris is likely to push for stronger control of the EU's external borders during its presidency of the Council.

## 2.2 Suggestions for the future of the EU: attention to defence and economic policies

The second axis of the French presidency of the Council is shaping the long-term European integration agenda. These questions should become particularly prominent following the conclusion of the Conference on the Future in March 2022 and occupy the second half of the French presidency. Based on the long-term voter expectation trends in France and on Paris strategic priorities for the EU, Macron is likely to place the issues of EU's global role and economic reform at the centre of the debates on the future of Europe.

While Paris has also consistently stressed the importance of values, democracy, and identity when discussing the future of the EU, the analysis below does not focus on these issues. As the national election approaches, Macron is under pressure to minimise discussions on values and identity, as they tend to create opportunities for politicians in the far right – i.e., his main opponents – to pursue politicization of the EU and thus mobilize their voters. Therefore, even if Paris may not avoid the topic altogether, France's engagement is likely to be reactive and aimed at de-escalation. As the analysis below focuses on France's proactive agenda, the question of values will not be considered.

### *Defence and foreign policy: strategic autonomy and new international partnerships*

The ambition to strengthen the EU's global role may well be the dominant theme of Macron's first term as president. Macron has been particularly insistent on the need to make the EU less dependent on the US in the realm of defence and security policies: this notion undergirds his vision of European 'strategic autonomy.' Although this idea chimes well with Washington's long-repeated request for its European partners to strengthen their national defence capabilities, Macron also maintains that the EU should be able to define its own security interests – an idea sharply criticised by Paris' partners on both sides of the Atlantic as unnecessary and dangerous to the stable and productive transatlantic cooperation.

These debates will undoubtedly resurface during the French presidency of the Council. Today, **Paris seeks to take advantage of the fact that Washington, in its attempts to normali-**

**se the bilateral France-US relations after the AUKUS controversy, has expressed support for greater EU defence integration and for strengthening the EU's global role.** If the Biden administration has indeed greenlighted Paris' ambition, the traditional argument that any talk of 'strategic autonomy' is detrimental to the transatlantic relations may become irrelevant. While this scenario is far from certain, Paris will be relatively free to present an ambitious vision for the bloc's security policy during its presidency of the Council.

To ensure that this vision is not met with as much resistance as Macron's statements to date, Paris must complement his vision with a practical and inclusive plan for strengthening European defence cooperation. The March 2022 EU summit on defence policy in Toulouse, whose inclusion in the SOTEU, as multiple interviewees confirmed, was a result of France's intense lobbying, will be important to watch in this respect. During the summit, member states are expected to approve the so-called EU Strategic Compass, a document which will present the first joint threat assessment for the whole EU. As several member states have already raised concern that the Strategic Compass might become yet another 'paper tiger' in EU defence initiatives,<sup>38</sup> one may reasonably expect that **France will use its presidency as an opportunity to showcase determination about developing a realistic and sustainable EU defence policy and to present a plan of the implementation and institutionalization of the document's guidelines.** A French Senate report on this issue, for example, recommends regularising the Compass process and establishing a mechanism for monitoring whether political and technical commitments are being met.

Another area where France will seek to align its ambition with its institutional responsibility is the development of EU international partnerships and, in particular, of the Commission's new Global Gateway initiative. This initiative will be first discussed on the international level at the EU-Africa meeting in February, which is seen by Macron as one of the priorities of the French presidency.<sup>39</sup> With that in mind, **France can be expected to use the format of the presidency of the Council to encourage the participation of other member governments in the Global Gateway initiative and to help with the preparation for its launch in Africa.** International partnerships on infrastructure development also form a cornerstone of the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy, which Paris actively supports. Given Macron's desire to strengthen the role France and the EU plays in this strategic area after the AUKUS agreement, one may expect Paris to work towards developing the Global Gateway programme all throughout its presidency of the Council.

### *Economy: more flexibility in Europe and stricter trade policy*

In Macron's view, the EU's economic power, competitiveness, and social convergence are all prerequisites for 'European sovereignty.' To strengthen the EU in each of these areas, Macron has suggested drafting a new European industrial strategy, toughen the EU trade and competition rules, and to restrict social dumping in the common market. However, the president insisted that 'long-term economic power' can only be built on the foundation a stable single currency, which is why, upon assuming office in 2017, he called for a com-

prehensive eurozone reform that would have introduced a common budget design to offset short-term economic shocks.

Despite Macron's failure this ambitious vision into reality, the EU's broader economic policy has since shifted closer to France's position. As noted above, the EU's change of heart was mostly due to structural trends and global events. In response to China's increasingly aggressive economic expansionism, Trump's trade wars and the uncertainty surrounding London's post-Brexit economic orientation, the Commission in 2016 approved special state aid rules for financing industrial projects 'of common European interest,' created a foreign investment screening system, and included stricter climate, social, and competition policy rules in the EU trade agreements. The Covid-19 pandemic further mobilized EU policymakers to defend Europe's strategic sectors and internal industrial capabilities. Lastly, in the wake of the pandemic, the EU agreed to pool national debts of the member states to finance the economic recovery and, although this step falls short of the much-cited "EU's Hamiltonian moment," this is an unprecedented step in the bloc's history.

In the context of these changes, Paris will seek to further entrench its vision in the discussions on the EU's economic governance during its presidency. France can be expected to push for a more flexible EU fiscal policy and, specifically, for dropping the requirement that national budget deficits of eurozone members should not exceed 3% of their annual GDP and for raising their public debt ceiling above the current 60% of GDP. Knowing that calls to loosen the supranational restrictions on domestic spending tend to be received

well by voters, Macron is likely to emphasize this issue building up to the election, even if he is aware that no agreement can be reached during the French presidency.

More tangible progress is likely in trade policy. During the French Presidency, the Council will discuss two proposals for trade defence instruments against foreign countries and companies violating the principles of fair trade. The first is the Commission's new proposal for an EU-wide anti-coercion instrument, designed to respond to such practices as targeted investment restrictions or import tariffs enacted by foreign governments on EU member states. Second, member states are likely to return to the discussions on the proposed instrument to control foreign subsidies that disrupt the EU's single market. France supports both of these initiatives and, once the Commission presents them to member states, is likely to push for their approval at the Council.

In summary, it is clear that France is well-positioned to make a significant and lasting impact both on the von der Leyen Commission's agenda and on broader course of European integration. It is thus crucial for Lithuania to identify how it can best work with Paris during its presidency and beyond. When seeking to understand what consequences the French presidency may have on Lithuania's interests, it is important to take into account not only the opportunities and risks associated with Paris' priorities, but also how they will be affected by the factors analysed above.

### **3. Lithuania's interests during the French presidency**

For Lithuania, strong and constructive cooperation with France matters well beyond the potential impact the French presidency is likely to have on the EU's policy and integration agendas. As the EU's strongest military power, France is becoming an increasingly important partner to Lithuania on foreign and security policy issues – despite the fact that Paris and Vilnius exhibit somewhat divergent views on transatlantic security, European defence integration, and Russia. Accordingly, by engaging in the implementation of the French presidency agenda, Lithuania would do well to focus not only on protecting its national interests in the realm of EU policymaking, but also on elevating the Franco-Lithuanian bilateral relations to a new level of cooperation.

The foregoing analysis suggests that Lithuania has a good opportunity to achieve both of these goals. On the one hand, the six months of the presidency is too short a period for Paris to significantly change the EU's policy on the issues most sensitive to Lithuania, namely the role of NATO in defending Europe or the EU-Russia relations (assuming Paris would seek that in the first place). On the other, knowing how important it is for Paris to approve at least one of the major EU legislative initiatives (CBAM, DMA, or DSA) during its presidency, France should be willing to enter into negotiations on specific compromises within their scope. For this reason, too, Lithuania's active engagement with and constructive support for France on these initiatives may bring dividends in bilateral and multilateral cooperation formats in the future.

The recommendations for Lithuanian decision makers build on this assessment of the political situation in Europe. Without denying the real and existing disagreements between the two countries, these proposals highlight France and Lithuania's convergent interests and the resulting opportunities for Vilnius to engage in constructive cooperation with Paris. The recommendations are structured according to the priority areas of the French presidency agenda.

### 3.1 Climate change

**Lithuania support France as it attempts to secure approval for CBAM and seek specific and constructive amendments of the proposed instrument.** Above all, Lithuania should seek to link CBAM tariffs with national GHG emissions not on sectoral or company-level emissions. First, this would put an end to manipulations, whereby the world's largest polluters (e.g. China) develop industrial export chains oriented specifically towards Europe that meet the EU rules, but maintain the climate-intensive economic practices in place elsewhere. Second, this would ensure African countries, which emit relatively little GHG but are most vulnerable to export restrictions, are not forced to reroute their exports elsewhere,, thus reducing CBAM's intended effect on climate change.

In addition, during the negotiations to secure the approval for CBAM, Lithuania should ask that the revenue generated by the tariff would be used to ameliorate the socioeconomic effects of the green transition in Europe or invested to fund the green transition in the Eastern Partnership countries or in Africa.

**Lithuania should support further discussions on the expansion of the ETS, stressing the need for effective compensatory measures for vulnerable consumers.** Given the deep divisions on this issue between member states, the prospects of either adopting or conclusively rejecting this proposal during the French presidency are rather low. That being said, Vilnius would be well advised to support further negotiations with the view to adopting this initiative in the long run, emphasizing the need to offset the effect of this measure on the most vulnerable social groups and consumers.

**Lithuania should demand strict conditions for including nuclear energy and natural gas in the EU's climate taxonomy.** Although extending the climate taxonomy is extremely important for France (and Poland), this would also strengthen the position of Russian energy companies. The sensitive nature of this issue in France allows Lithuania to demand that both nuclear energy and natural gas would be included into the taxonomy on a different status than renewable energy sources and to set a strict deadline for removing these energy sources from the taxonomy in the future.

### 3.2 Digital policy

**Lithuania should actively support the idea of 'digital sovereignty,' understood as an effort to limit the harmful relation of dependence on third countries, and especially China, in the area of key technologies.** In this context, Lithuania could also encourage France to support deeper trade and technology cooperation between the EU and Taiwan, e.g., in the field of semiconductors.

**Lithuania should support the compromise drafts of DMA and DSA that grant the Commission with powers to implement the regulations envisioned in these acts.** While Lithuania still needs to hold extensive public consultations on the potential effects these legal acts on its economy and society, centralizing their implementation in the Commission should be in line with Lithuania's general interest of avoiding excessive digital market regulation. France has already signalled it would accept such a compromise, and Vilnius' support would therefore contribute to developing positive relations with Paris.

### 3.3 Migration

Given the low likelihood of member states reaching an agreement on the all-encompassing EU migration policy reform during the French presidency, Lithuania should focus on concrete policy initiatives that can be more easily implemented and would quickly produce tangible results. **Strengthening the EU's external borders promises to be an area of constructive engagement with France; Vilnius could also support Paris as it tries to secure the EU-Africa migration agreement,** especially on issues such as dismantling migrant smuggling, devising instruments for quick and safe repatriation of migrants, and supporting countries of origin. To deepen the cooperation with France, Vilnius could support Paris' proposals to develop a system for transferring refugees within the EU.

### 3.4 Security, defence, and foreign policies

As the paradigm of 'strategic autonomy' gains greater acceptance in EU policy discussions, Vilnius may benefit more by selectively incorporating the concept into its approach to EU security and defence policy where it matches Lithuania's interests than by insisting on a sceptical attitude towards the idea. For example, as the Toulouse Summit on EU defence policy approaches, Vilnius could host a thematic conference for policymakers and EU security experts to assess the compatibility and complementarity between Lithuania's 'values-based policy' and France's 'European sovereignty' (e.g., 'For what values are we building our strategic autonomy?'). More broadly, however **Lithuania may be best to stress the position that 'strategic autonomy' should**

**be developed with a view of substantive policy gains in specific policy areas** and should not be pursued dogmatically.

With respect to more concrete defence and foreign policy initiatives, **Lithuania could support France's ambition of developing EU defence capacities in the field of technologies of the future.** For example, knowing that Paris seeks to develop capacities for space security of the EU, Vilnius should encourage the involvement of Lithuania's defence and technology industry, researchers, and academics in joint projects in this field. **Lithuania would also benefit from and should support France's efforts to institutionalise the monitoring, implementation, and regular reviews of the Strategic Compass.**

With respect to external economic policy, France's efforts to expand the Global Gateway strategy and to develop further EU trade defence mechanisms are in line with both Lithuania's economic interests and its strategic goals. Beyond showing support for the Global Gateway initiative in Council debates, **Lithuania should conduct a comprehensive feasibility study of its involvement in infrastructure development projects in different regions of the world, beginning with Africa. Lithuania should also advocate for explicitly including cooperation on the security of cyber infrastructure into the overall Global Gateway program.** Vilnius should also seek a prompt approval of measures for keeping coercive activities and foreign subsidies in check. Because these initiatives in the EU's trade policy correspond to the Washington's goal of curbing aggressive and expansionist geo-economic policies of China, Vilnius should encourage transatlantic cooperation in this field and the US involvement in respective EU initiatives.

Lastly, if France proposes to move to a qualified majority voting on security and foreign policy issues, Lithuania could support the start of negotiations on the proposed change and then raise the issue of a 'vital national interest clause', which could be used by a member state which finds itself in the minority. To

address the concerns of Paris and other proponents of the move to majority vote, Vilnius should consider formulating the clause in a way that would make clear that the declared vital national interest cannot be in conflict with the EU's fundamental values.

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- <sup>14</sup> Generally speaking, the attention to culture – whether it be the European culture in France or the French culture in Europe – will be one of the distinguishing features of France's Presidency of the Council of the EU. On the occasion of the presidency, France will establish a special committee for culture, which will invite representatives of arts and culture from all over Europe to participate in events in France. At the same time, Paris appears to have every intention of using the French language exclusively during the period of the presidency. See Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne and Clément Beaune, 'La Présidence Française de l'Union Européenne Est Une Opportunité Historique Pour La Francophonie', *Le Figaro*, 8 April 2021, sec. Figaro Vox, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/monde/la-presidence-francaise-de-l-union-europeenne-est-une-opportu-nite-historique-pour-la-francophonie-20210408>.
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