



EU-28 WATCH

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1. The Eastern Neighbours and Russia

When assessing the current perception of Russia in France, three different levels need to be taken into account: public opinion, the position of intermediate actors such as political parties, civil society organisations and enterprises, and finally the governmental level. Starting with public opinion, French citizens in their majority hold unfavourable views of Russia's current government and geopolitical role. An IFOP opinion poll carried out in September 2015 showed that 72 % of those questioned had a negative opinion of Vladimir Putin, generally confirming the results of a poll from 2013, which indicated 80 % sharing a negative view of the Russian president. A 2015 Pew Research center poll which measures global public opinion on Russia comes to equally negative results, with 80 % of the French questioned not having "confidence" in Vladimir Putin, one of the poorest results among all countries. The same poll shows that 51 % believe Russia is a menace to its neighbouring countries. At the time, the September 2015 IFOP poll reveals that 75 % of those questioned think Russia was wrong in intervening in the Syrian conflict in order to support the regime of Bachar El-Assad. Also, French public opinion remains sensitive to the degree of freedom in Russia, with 86 % rating the guarantees for public liberties insufficient.

Coming now to political parties, the picture is a lot less clear. In each political party, we find staunch supporters of the "Russian cause". The pro-Russian network is stronger though on the political right, with ex-President Nicolas Sarkozy being a relentless defender of reinforcing relations with Vladimir Putin. In July 2015, ten members of the French National Assembly, most of them from the centre-right opposition, made the headlines when going on a visit to Crimea, against the explicit advice of the government. The reasons for supporting Russia may differ from one individual to another, ranging from old family ties over economic and geopolitical rationality to an outright sympathy with President Putin's views on societal issues. Also, many eurosceptics and sovereignists join the ranks of the pro-Russian network, because they see in the country an ally in their fight against the dissolution of the nation-state in federal structures like the EU. Those voices see themselves in the Gaullist tradition, which tried to counterbalance US hegemony by developing strong independent ties with Russia. Finally, the far-right Front National has a strong affinity with Putin's Russia, its EU-critical stance, and conservative moral conceptions.

Turning to civil society, France traditionally has a dense network of associations working on developing relations with Russia in a variety of fields. Frequently, descendants of Russian immigrants are strongly involved in such organisations, their work being complemented by cultural diplomacy from the Russian side, with the news website "sputnik" as one of its instruments. A huge cultural and religious centre in Paris, whose construction right next to the Eiffel tower began in 2015, is supposed to strengthen the country's impact on France in the future. As to economic relations, they have suffered considerably from the repercussions of the Ukrainian crisis. Trade between the two countries reached a volume of 17 billion in 2014, which is 6.6 % less than in the year before. The decline is the consequence of European sanctions in the armament, financial, and energy sector, as well as of Russian retaliation measures especially in the agricultural and food sector.

As to the political level, Franco-Russian relations had reached a low point when the sale of two Mistral warships was cancelled in August 2015 in the framework of European sanctions, a decision heavily criticized as "demagogical" by opposition leader Nicolas Sarkozy. At the same time, both countries have cooperated in the implementation of the Minsk agreement on Ukraine as well as in the international deal over the Iranian nuclear programme. Until November 2015, a major disagreement separated France and Russia on the issue of the Syrian civil war, Vladimir Putin remaining actively supportive of the Assad regime, whereas the French government saw the disposal of the authoritarian ruler as a precondition for any kind of solution of the crisis. The terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015 have significantly changed the situation, with France urgently seeking the broadest coalition possible in the war against the Islamic state (ISIS). The Hollande administration now seems to accept that the Assad regime shall remain in place for some time until the immediate threat through ISIS has been contained, but still insists that a definitive solution of the Syrian crisis must include the exit of the authoritarian leader. Immediately after the Paris shootings, the Chiefs of Staff of the French and Russian armies had their first official contact since the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis and agreed to better coordinate their operations in Syria. A few days later, on 16 November 2015, President Francois Hollande visited his Russian counterpart in order to find common ground for the future of Syria, but the encounter was overshadowed by the downing of a Russian airplane by Turkish forces. The recent

statements by Prime Minister Manuel Valls, who in a speech in front of the National Assembly demanded that sanctions against Russia should be repealed, equally witness a turnover in France's policy. It seems that due to the unprecedented terrorist threat the government is progressively adopting an attitude towards Russia, which is shaped more by realpolitik than by principles.

The March 2015 proposition of European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker to create an army of the European Union as a token for its willingness to defend common values in crises such as the Ukrainian one has been widely noted in French public debate. Commentators in France have underlined that their country will necessarily play the key role, if such a project should be developed, as it disposes of the strongest military force among the continental EU member states. Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian has pointed out though that the idea of an EU army has little chances to be realized, as most EU member states are very reluctant to contribute to common missions and rather let France carry their main burden.

Links:

- Russian news website in French: <http://fr.sputniknews.com>
- French embassy in Russia: <http://www.ambafrance-ru.org>
- Interview of the news agency Interfax with the French Ambassador to Russia, Jean Maurice Ripert, on August 1st, 2015: <http://www.ambafrance-ru.org/L-Ambassadeur-de-France-en-Russie-nous-comptons-sur-un-renforcement-des#Vous-le-savez-la-France-fait-partie-du-format-Normandie-sur-l-Ukraine-nbsp>

2. EU Enlargement

The unfavourable attitude of the French towards the current Russian foreign policy has not made them into champions for Ukrainian EU accession. Typical for the "enlargement fatigue" among the French population, its majority is opposed to offering EU membership to the eastern neighbourhood country. President Hollande voiced this concern among his constituency, when he pointed out after the Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga in May 2015: "We must ensure that this Eastern Partnership enables Ukraine to be fully associated, although association in no way prejudices membership – I've been perfectly clear on that."

The year 2015 has brought no significant change in France's attitude towards the EU accession of Turkey. Following a decision taken under the presidency of Jacques Chirac, once the negotiations have been successfully closed, the entry of Turkey needs to be ratified by a referendum among the French population. Though no recent opinion polls are available, there are no indications that the overwhelmingly unfavourable attitude of the French has changed (according to a January 2014 poll, 83 % of those questioned were opposed). On the contrary, it is to be expected that the events of 2015 will reinforce the hostility towards the entry of an overwhelmingly Muslim country into the EU. In October 2015, Prime Minister Manuel Valls was asked in the National Assembly whether the recent refugee crisis and the deal with Turkey over the readmission of migrants in exchange for visa liberalisation had changed the government's attitude in regard to EU accession. Valls' answer reiterated the position which the French executive has taken over the last years: The negotiations with Turkey should continue, but are "open-ended". As soon as they are concluded, it is up to the sovereign French people whether they ratify Turkey's accession or not.

EU-28 Watch

On the project

This EU-28 Watch is part of the a project called Eastern Neighbours and Russia: Close links with EU citizens (ENURC) in collaboration with TEPESA. The project focuses on developing EU citizens' understanding of the topic of the Eastern Neighbourhood and Russia and aims at encouraging their interest and involvement in this policy which has an impact on their daily lives.

The EU-28 Watch project is mapping out the discourses on these issues in European policies all over Europe. Research institutes from all 28 member states are invited to give overviews on the discourses in their respective countries.

This survey was conducted on the basis of a questionnaire that has been elaborated in March 2015. Most of the reports were delivered in June 2015. This issue and all previous issues are available on the recently relaunched EU-28 Watch website: www.EU-28Watch.org.

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