

European interview
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“An open conflict between the West and Russia is not an option”

You sit in the European Parliament in the Renew group. In what way is the re-election of Emmanuel Macron good news for the European Union?

The re-election of French President Emmanuel Macron is obviously good news not only for France but also for Europe. Emmanuel Macron is one of the few leaders with a vision for Europe. His policy takes into account the realities at national level, but also the major challenges that the European Union will have to face in the coming years. In these troubled times, with a war in Ukraine, we need strong European leaders like him, and I am delighted to see that the French have put their trust in him for the next five years.

Is France taking the lead in the EU?

President Macron has put new priorities for Europe on the table and it must be said that French initiatives have pushed boundaries. France was one of the first to talk about the need for a European defence, which in the context of the Ukrainian war is proving to be a key issue for our security. As early as his election in 2017, President Macron was also talking about the fact that Europe must be more sovereign. Unfortunately, we realised during the pandemic how dependent we are, for example, on imports of medicines from certain countries and how much more autonomous we must become in this area.

The Spanish, German and Portuguese Prime Ministers had co-signed a tribune calling for a vote for Macron. Do you see a politicisation of the European space?

We are experiencing a period of war and Europe must remain united. Faced with a candidate who has public affinities with Moscow, and who could therefore jeopardise the future of Europe, it is important not to shy away from engagement. I have done so at my own level. I am delighted that the leaders have been able to put aside their political differences and clearly support Emmanuel Macron.

Many Western officials thought that Russia would not attack Ukraine. Why did they not listen to the warnings of the Eastern European countries?

Each state has its own history, its own neighbours and therefore different associations and assumptions. As Czechs, we have a historical experience with the Russians. Before the Prague Spring in 1968, nobody imagined that one day the tanks would enter Prague. The international community was wrong at the time. We must learn from history. I, therefore, hope that the Western states have now understood how dangerous the Russian regime is to our security.

What dangers does this attack pose for the Union? Is there a risk of a third world war?

We did not start the war in Ukraine, we did not want it. The main responsibility lies with the Kremlin. But of course, we must do everything to avoid escalation, in other words a third world war. An open conflict between the West and Russia is not an option, diplomacy is the only way for all.

Europeans continue to buy gas and oil from Russia. How can the EU ensure its energy security?

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We pay €800 million every day to the Russians for gas, oil and coal. So we are financing their war and their army. This has to stop. I have signed an initiative by the former Belgian Prime Minister, Guy Verhofstadt, to impose a total and immediate embargo on imports of these energies from Russia. The European Union plans, in any case in the medium term, to cut itself off from Russian energy, but we need to move faster. As the war is underway, it is now that we must act. Beyond the geopolitical issue, Russia is also a very unstable supplier, and one which does not hesitate to challenge our energy contracts. As far as oil is concerned, economists note that Europe would be able to replace Russian imports quickly, notably by reaching an agreement with OPEC. As regards gas, it is obviously a different story, but I think that with European solidarity and the help, notably of our American allies who will substantially increase imports of liquefied gas (LNG), we can do it. In any case, we have a moral responsibility towards the Ukrainians, who are fighting for our values.

Do the divergent positions on Russia signal the end of the Visegrad Group, comprising Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia?

Former President Vaclav Havel initiated the Visegrad Group, as an informal format. It helps the Central European states to better coordinate and make their voices heard in the European institutions. However, we do not agree on everything and we say so when it is the case. There are problems in Poland and Hungary with respect to the rule of law. At present, Hungary also has an ambivalent position towards Moscow and is holding back the adoption of new sanctions.

Is Poland's solidarity with Ukrainian refugees a game changer?

Poland is facing an impressive flow of refugees and the solidarity of the European Union must be absolute. I recently visited the Polish-Ukrainian border and witnessed the incredible commitment of

the Polish associations on the ground. This does not mean that we should forget the problems linked to the rule of law. The procedures will continue, and the Ukrainian situation does not change that.

The Czech Republic will take over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union on 1 July. How will the war in Ukraine affect its agenda?

The management of the war in Ukraine and its impact on European citizens will be the priority of the Czech Presidency. There is no doubt about that. In concrete terms, the Czechs will probably want to organise European solidarity with regard to the management of the massive arrival of Ukrainian refugees. The Czech Republic is already hosting almost 400,000 Ukrainians. They need to be guaranteed access to national social security, for example. For a country of over 10 million inhabitants, this represents a considerable budgetary burden. The Czech Republic will also have to work on the continent's energy independence from Russia, as well as on energy security for all our citizens.

Emmanuel Macron once criticised NATO for being «brain dead». Doesn't the war in Ukraine confirm that the Alliance remains the primary guarantor of European security?

The war in Ukraine shows us that security in Europe is not a given. I can tell you that the day the Russian army invaded Ukraine, as a Czech, I felt relieved knowing that my country was part of NATO. We see that in other countries, which until now considered themselves neutral, the debate is changing. Finland and Sweden now want to be part of NATO. This shows that the transatlantic alliance is still the best guarantee for our security. This does not mean that we should leave our security in the hands of the United States, but rather that we should strengthen the European pillar of this organisation by investing in armaments and defence. We have things to do at the European level on defence, we must strengthen synergies; national armies should be more complementary, specialise. We have some

catching up to do on the use of high technology in armaments. The Americans are flooding the market with their drones, and our Eurodrone still hasn't been launched on the market. With the increase in hybrid conflicts, more work also needs to be done regarding European cyber security.

The health crisis and the war in Ukraine highlight the European Union's dependences, in health, food and industry. How, and under what conditions, can European sovereignty be strengthened?

There are strategic areas in which we need to strengthen our autonomy. The pandemic has revealed our dependence on imports of medical equipment from third countries; we have all heard about the shortage of medicines. In fact, 80% of active pharmaceutical ingredients come from India or China. But we also need to promote trade policy with third countries. More than 35 million jobs depend on the EU's trade with the rest of the world, and the gradual opening up to free trade has brought hundreds of billions of euros to our continent since the 1990s. Our openness is therefore our strength; we are the largest trading area in the world.

Europe has just celebrated the 18th anniversary of the great enlargement of 2004. What is your assessment of this enlargement?

Milan Kundera spoke of Central Europe as being «kidnapped». We have, in fact, been part of the same European family, both historically and culturally. We have the same values, the same aspirations. Unfortunately, communism weighed on the political and economic development of our region. I am happy to see that my country is part of a Europe that is more united than ever against Russia, a Europe that is working together on an ambitious European project.

Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have just applied urgently for EU membership, the Western Balkan countries have been negotiating for years. Are you in favour of further enlargements?

As far as Ukraine is concerned, I think that it should be offered a real European perspective. The Ukrainians must be told that they are undeniably part of the European family and that the door is open. So the best thing to do is to offer them candidate status. It is a long and difficult process. Ukraine will not enter tomorrow, or even the day after tomorrow. I don't think that Ukraine should be left in a kind of antechamber. I believe that enlargement is a political instrument for the Union and allows us to extend our influence. The South Caucasus region, for example, is an area where the interests of different powers clash. We have our role to play and the enlargement policy allows us to do so.

However, Emmanuel Macron is talking about a Europe of variable geometry, with, on the one hand, a «European political community» that could be joined by the candidate countries and, on the other, avant-garde initiatives. He has also suggested a revision of the treaties.

President Macron has expressed the need to reform Europe, which will inevitably involve changing the Treaties. I absolutely agree with this statement and this was also the opinion of the majority of citizens during the Conference on the Future of Europe. The European Union must adapt and have modern institutions capable of dealing with the challenges of the day. We must learn from the lessons of the pandemic, for example. The joint purchase of vaccines worked, we were able to provide them to all our citizens, and pay less for them. Europe should therefore have more competence in health issues. We also need to reflect on the blockages that may exist in the Council; for example, we see countries threatening to veto the entire package of sanctions against Russia if we do not grant them one or more exceptions or exemptions. We are sending out a very bad signal if we are unable to take a strong stand against Russia.

What do you think more broadly about the outcome of the Conference on the Future of Europe?

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I was part of the European Parliament delegation, which was sent to participate in the Conference on the Future of Europe. I was in charge of digital issues, and I worked with citizens on their proposals in this field. It was a rich and exciting experience, a rather unique exercise. What is striking is to see that the citizens have the same questions as the politicians. On digital issues, for example, they want more regulation, but at the same time they do not

want their freedom on the Internet to be limited. In any case, the proposals are on the table. It is up to us, and above all to the States, to implement them.

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