



## EU makeover or French takeover?

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The new concept of the EU's future initially put forward by President Macron in a letter to Europeans in April, has gained momentum with plans for a two year "Conference on the Future of Europe" which will take place under the German and French presidencies in the second half of 2020 and the first half of 2022, respectively. The blueprint aims at overhauling nearly all aspects of how EU policy areas operate, and at making the bloc "more united and sovereign". The two page document does not offer a huge amount of detail but calls "to produce tangible and concrete results". In actual fact, it will aim at revising aspects of the EU treaties and respond to challenges arising from Brexit, the ongoing rift in transatlantic relations and rising anti-EU sentiment. But it is also and foremost designed to set the stage to put forward France's political views on the future role of the EU. At the heart of the French President's push lies the ambition for France to guide the EU as a global superpower and his assertive choice to embody European leadership on the international stage.

The blueprint, which proposes that EU leaders hold their first discussion on the conference as early as next month, is also designed to address the tense relations and differing political views which have emerged in the Franco-German partnership recently. Since his arrival at the Elysee, Mr Macron has effectively seen his plan of a more strategic EU so far frustrated by a risk-averse German Chancellor Angela Merkel and her unexpected political decline in Germany's

elections in September 2017. Or, as some top officials in Berlin simply commented "Macron has decided to push forward with European reforms that he considers necessary, alone and without Germany."

In particular, the recent fall-outs between Paris and Berlin over Macron's demands for a Eurozone budget and the French President's failed attempt to shape the EU leadership during the recent European elections, have exacerbated tensions with Germany. By pushing for the adoption of a transnational candidate lists, the French President has effectively attempted to increase his voice in the EU assembly, and his party's "Renew Europe" limited influence in Europe, although without success. The proposal, one of the main focuses of the proposed EU's makeover, is intended to direct some of the 73 seats freed up by Britain's departure, to Europe - wide constituencies, instead of national ones. Far from being an improvement on a reformed EU "democratic functioning", it smacks of another elite driven project which would risk creating a system dominated by predominant large member states, notably Germany and France, divide the EU Parliament into two classes of MEP's, and make the EU even more remote from the voters than they already are. At present, it is also unclear whether Macron's insistence for a clear commitment for the creation of transnational lists is yet another unpredictable element of what is already a highly stormy negotiating EU process. The Conference also calls for a vague

“ block of policy priorities” or issues at stake to guide the future of Europe, which will comprise -digitalisation, migration, fight against inequalities, the social market economy model, trade, competitiveness - amongst others.

What is already clear instead, is that by placing defence at the core of “his new EU”, Mr Macron is aiming at replacing the economic leadership of Germany with a geostrategic one, backed by the foreign and security policy leadership of France. By installing allies in the key positions of the Brussels institutions at the recent European elections, the French President has helped facilitate his frustrated goals and manoeuvre himself as potential head of the future bloc.

By contrast, the ongoing political uncertainty in Germany and Mr Macron’s penchant for disruptive politics, including his recent head-on criticism of NATO, could exacerbate tensions in Franco-German relations and seriously hamper any developments in proposing a new future EU policy agenda. Mr Macron’s assertiveness in trying to take the lead and steer a new course in European affairs is already reflected in his recent veto in starting trade talks with the US, his support for a rapprochement with Russia, and his decision to block the opening of EU accession talks with Albania and Macedonia. However, since the French President’s election, EU leaders have so far shown little appetite for EU sovereignty and for his demand of greater federalism.

Undoubtedly, Brexit is already raising awkward questions about the EU’s unity, or its limited view of sovereignty, and some of the underlying structural problems facing the union in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The blueprint for a “Conference on the Future of Europe” is aimed at showing a renewed Franco-German partnership and tackling the shortcomings of an

EU acting as a mere transactional organisation, with its recent fall-outs, and power struggles which have unleashed at the heart of the EU, now also between Parliament and Council. But it also sharply focuses on one of the foremost reasons for Brexit, ie Britain’s reluctance to come to terms with the horse - trading and coalition building method of governance of the Community, and the standard way of reaching agreement, as opposed to its “winner takes all” truly democratic Westminster system. Undoubtedly Europe is in urgent need to take a critical look at the state of its democracy and at the way decisions are taken at EU level. Time will tell if Mr Macron’s initiative will point the way further for a new bold vision of the future of the EU, or be the result of the traditional EU least biggest disappointment, hinging upon compromise. One thing seems certain at present: the Franco-German struggle will be at the centre of who will dominate the EU policy making.