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The French EU Presidency from a Danish perspective

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Skrevet af

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To round off this afternoon's discussion just a few very basic points about the French EU-presidency in a Danish perspective. Any substantial analysis would evidently require more time than we have. So, I will focus on perceptions.

Danes, including Danish politicians, tend to stop short of the Germans Alps when looking out over Europe. Germany has for many reasons been the entity to align with politically and remains our main trading partner. After Brexit we leave the old ally UK aside. France is further afield, also for Danish business. A nuanced picture is less readily at hand, beginning perhaps with the rather small group of Danes who speak the language with any kind of fluency.

So, we are often left with limited and limiting perceptions. Yellow vests become the tangible expression of a country's deep discontent, insecurity, and instability. That perception is readily helped along by the fact that general gloom is being widely echoed both to the right and to the left of the French political spectrum, even more so now that France is gearing up for presidential elections. The far-right journalist and presidential hopeful Eric Zemmour has found his way also to Danish news media, joining ranks with Marine Le Pen.

There are counter-narratives, perhaps less ingrained in public perception. So let me move to the French side of the table for a moment. A recent survey by Institut Montaigne points to actual growing content among the French regarding their lives overall and less fear of economic decline than only two years ago. The French economy is in solid growth (the forecast is 6 % this year, with a 3 % jump alone from second to third quarter), right now doing better than e.g., Germany. GDP is back at pre-Covid levels. Unemployment has fallen below pre-Covid levels, (at 7,6 pct.) the lowest in a decade.

France has often been criticized - not always without reason - for its bureaucracy, its inflexible labour market, its obstacles to free enterprise. Yet it managed to roll out a successful Covid-vaccinations programme - granted after a slow start and not with French vaccines in front - but presently putting France ahead of Germany. It is also - Paris in particular - one of the hottest and most hyped start-up-scenes in Europe, especially in tech. As start-up-friendly according to the charts as Copenhagen and Stockholm and right in front regarding numbers of start-ups. France has the highest

share of IT companies in Europe and competes with Germany for the coveted unicorns, surpassing the German neighbour in value.

Without minimizing the problems that remain in the French economy - debt burden etc. - and in French society, this is also the France that is taking over the EU-presidency. My point being - and especially to the Danes - that the gap between modernities is perhaps less than sometimes perceived in our parts of the world and so could be the interests.

That brings us to another level of perception, important for the political aspect, namely that of the France of grandeur, of great speeches on Europe, of the special French role, and a France that has been seen to go it alone when it comes to external affairs. There is a reason why the French minister for European affairs Clément Beaune was asked recently how Paris would ensure that national politics and in particular the presidential campaign in 2022 would not influence the French EU-presidency unduly. Suspicion lingers - presidential campaign or not - that France in specific matters would not be foreign to pursuing her own interests rather than the collective interest of the EU. Read: unlike the unifying power that Germany has been under Merkel.

Clément Beaune for his part was certain that Paris would know how to keep things apart. He at least rightly pointed out, that no EU-presidency exists in a vacuum. It is a process within the EU that neither starts nor ends with one single presidency, and where everybody inevitably acts against a national backdrop. But right now - and France being France - it is perhaps more important than ever to consult, listen, explain, and try to win over. Paris may have missed out on that one here and there.

Not all can be smooth sailing. One example is the French priority of the social union. As The Economist put it, telling the Scandinavians how to run a labour market is akin to teaching the French how to bake baguettes. Denmark has chosen to remain outside the negotiating mandate on minimum wage for reasons of its collective bargaining system and is passionate about it. There are and will be some real breaking points. Others will depend on attitude and negotiating skills. Fiscal rules and competition rules e.g., present themselves as tight corners to maneuver.

A particular challenge for France seen from a Danish perspective will be to find a balance between the French impetus for a renewal of the European project and the status quo. Some will argue that as 1989 was a sea-change which brought about the Maastricht Treaty, so is now and its important changes to the global order. According

to Paris the EU cannot stand still when the rest of the world is moving. What is needed is une Europe qui protege - a Europe that protects - and une Europe Puissance - a powerful Europe, held together by a strategic autonomy or unhindered capability to act in sectors ranging from defence to industry.

The French vision, especially the defence and security component, is not readily shared by all, perhaps even well understood. It will be a challenge to make things move in this sector as it may be in others.

President Macron and his government have in all fairness put greater emphasis on working at the EU-level than any of the presidential predecessors. They have stepped up the building of coalitions across Europe and been quite good at it, the latest being the Quirinale Treaty with Italy. But it is probably wise to also note the urge to move ahead in smaller groups, when the 27 become too complicated - unlike the Merkel instinct. The European ambition is another. So whatever alliance building there will be and must be seen from the Danish point of view, it is doubtful that this presidency will leave everybody to just stay snugly in their comfort zones.

The new German government may by all accounts be extending a hand to Paris on several issues important to France, given a push to that vital French-German partnership which carried the passing of the EU COVID recovery package. If that holds true, Paris will have a strong point of departure for what promises to be a very exciting first half of 2022.