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## WILL FILLON CHANGE FRENCH POLICY ON RUSSIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST?

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**W**hat might France's foreign policy look like if François Fillon, who won a landslide in the conservative presidential primary last Sunday becomes the country's next head of state in May 2017? As Vladimir Putin praised Nicolas Sarkozy's former prime minister on his plans for a rapprochement with Moscow, observers noted the close ties the two men had developed when they were prime ministers of their respective countries: This is part of Russia's wider effort to cultivate ties with like-minded European politicians as it seeks to end its diplomatic isolation. Mr Fillon has said he favours lifting economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU and the US after the former annexed Crimea in 2013.

His stance however could prove to be a liability at a time of widespread hostility in much of Europe to Russia military intervention in Syria. Here again, Mr Fillon is pushing for a rapprochement with Mr Putin and the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad which he feels should be allowed to stay in place – a view which flies in the face of President François Hollande's repeated view that peace in Syria can only be built once Al-Assad exits. François Fillon believes it is in France's paramount interest to dispose of the threat posed by Isis once and for all.

The French electorate cannot be described as pro-Russian: in a recent Harris poll, 61% of respondents approved of maintaining economic sanctions imposed against Russia after its annexation of Crimea in 2013 but that percentage is lower on the right than on the left of the political spectrum. Only one quarter of respondents wanted their country to leave NATO.

In this context, Vladimir Putin's complimentary remarks about François Fillon have sparked a debate as to how close to Putin France's maybe next president really is. Three years ago he caused a stir by denouncing a prospective joint American-French bombardment of Syria from the annual gathering of the Valdai club of senior officials and strategists convened in Russia every year. Mr Fillon's stance is thus not opportunistic but well thought through. Doing so from Russia was all the more remarkable as it is not considered good form in France to denounce the country's foreign policy from abroad. But he does hold strong Gaullist convictions – close ties to the USSR, now Russia are part of a long standing conceptual framework.

Some in France fear what they see as the growing influence of Vladimir Putin in France, quoting loans from Moscow to support the extreme right wing Front National party led by Marine Le Pen and the strong sympathies Russia elicits in one of the leading left wing candidates in the presidential election, Jean Luc Melenchon. They quote Vladimir Putin's gift of a bottle of wine – *millésime 1931* – to François Fillon on the death of his mother to conclude that this is a typical gesture of a mafia boss to his close underling. This sounds smacks of paranoia.

The newly anointed conservative candidate to the French presidency is a serious politician. If Germany – France's paramount ally in Europe, sticks to sanctions a senior French diplomat points out that France is unlikely to strike out on its own. The current fragile European consensus on Russia and support for Ukraine is far more likely to be broken should the US president-elect Donald Trump signal the lifting of sanctions.

The second question raised by François Fillon's stance on Russia is whether it will help to get him elected to the presidency next year. Two points are worth remembering here. The vast majority of those who vote for Marine Le Pen are strongly inclined to Vladimir Putin, Fillon's strategy is to win back part of the traditional conservative vote which in recent elections has switched to the extreme right wing Front National. If they are attracted, among other reasons to switch their vote because of Mr Fillon's views on Russia, that will help him build a strong base for the second round.

The second point is that he thrives on his image as a serious politician: if arguments calling for Russia to be readmitted into the concert of European nations because the priority is the fight against Isis gain traction, that will do no harm to his candidacy. How much would the annexation of Crimea then weigh is an open question. With regard to the Maghreb, little change need be elected – France's gives strong support to Tunisia as it moves to consolidate democracy and that will continue, as will strong links with Morocco. French relations with Algeria which are better today that under Nicolas Sarkozy should improve further: Algeria is in the vanguard of the fight against Isis and shares François Fillon's views about Syria. Saudi Arabia's recent request to Algeria to help broker peace between factions in Yemen and the traditional good relations between Algiers and Tehran make Algeria a partner of weight in the region.

When push comes to shove next spring, the fight against Isis might will probably carry more weight in the minds of most French electors than the barbarity of the Syrian regime all the more as electors know that Saudi Arabia, Qatar and until recently, Turkey, have supplied considerable support and weapons to the Islamist groups fighting Bashar al-Assad. The memory of the terrorist attacks in France and Belgium these past two years matters more to them than whatever may have past in Ukraine. Furthermore, French presidential elections are fought on domestic issues, not of matters of foreign affairs. Were a major terrorist attack to occur in the run up to next May's poll, that would only reinforce François Fillon. Some observers fear the influence Vladimir Putin has gained in France by means of money and in trolls but the US is so thoroughly discredited in the eyes of most Frenchmen after the election of Donald Trump and the UK after Brexit, that it is hardly surprising that a stronger Gaullist world view should have re-emerged.