

The Prevailing Policy of the Republican Integration Contract

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Abstract: Faced with societal diversification, French integration policy has shifted from a reception-oriented approach towards a “contractual obligation” framework. This article analyses the overhaul of the Republican Integration Contract (CIR) under the presidency of Emmanuel Macron, along with its developments and challenges. The government established a highly demanding bilateral contract structured around three pillars: strengthened French-language learning (accompanied by mandatory assessments), deeper civic training, and the digitalisation of procedures through the Digital Administration for Foreigners in France (ANEF), which embodies genuine algorithmic governance. Nevertheless, this pursuit of efficiency generates adverse side effects. Stringent criteria and dematerialised procedures exacerbate stratification among immigrants, leaving the most vulnerable groups exposed to a severe “digital divide” and administrative exclusion. Furthermore, the imposition of a coercive identity crystallises tensions between integration and respect for cultural diversity. To reconcile social cohesion and inclusion, future integration policy must bridge the gap between macro-policy design and local resources while reconnecting with the human dimension of public services.

Keywords: Macron Government, Republican Integration Contract (CIR), Migration Policy.

1. Introduction

With the acceleration of globalisation, the number of immigrants in France continues to rise. According to data from the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE), the share of the immigrant population in France has exceeded 10% of the total population in recent years (INSEE, 2023). Within this macroscopic context of growing societal diversification, France faces multiple major challenges related to immigrant integration, cultural differences and the construction of national identity. Immigrant integration depends not merely on objective economic and educational indicators; it also directly concerns the transmission of the fundamental values of the Republic and the maintenance of overall social cohesion (WOLFF V, 2022: 27–53). To respond to this complex social reality, successive French governments have continuously adjusted and overhauled integration policies. In this respect, the “Republican Integration Contract” (CIR) represents one of the most important institutional innovations within France’s immigration governance system in recent decades. The CIR policy seeks, through strengthened language training, promotion of civic education and the establishment of clear criteria for adherence to core values, to help newcomers understand French social norms and abide by republican principles. It thereby enables a transition from mere “institutional integration” toward deeper “cultural and political identification”.

Since 2018, Emmanuel Macron’s government has undertaken systematic, far-reaching reform of CIR policy through the enactment of foundational legislation such as the Asylum and Immigration Act (Act No. 2018-778) (French Republic, 2018). This reform centres on several pillars: a substantial increase in the duration and assessment requirements of language training programmes; deepened content and mandatory status for civic training; restructuring of interministerial cooperation within policy implementation systems; and vigorous promotion of the institutionalisation and digital transition of management mechanisms. These

measures reflect not only the modernising vision of contemporary French immigration policy, but also notable innovation in specific pedagogical methods, operational synergy and monitoring governance. At the same time, the genesis and evolution of CIR policy reveal the transformative logic of France’s long-standing immigration policy regime: shifting from a “reception management” framework toward a “contractual obligation” framework, which provides a solid institutional foundation and historical reference points for understanding current policy reforms.

This article aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the Republican Integration Contract (CIR) policy under the Macron government. It first presents the central positioning of CIR policy under Macron, while tracing its formative context and historical evolution. Next, it examines in depth the specific components of its reform and innovative practices, notably the upgrading of linguistic and axiological training together with the rollout of the digital management platform (Digital Administration for Foreigners in France, ANEF) (Official Journal of the French Republic, 2018). Finally, it offers a critical analysis of practical challenges encountered during policy implementation, including profound contradictions between social integration and national identity, inherent tensions between republican values and cultural diversity, and the gap between macro-policy design and local-level application. Through the study of CIR policy, this article not only sheds light on the Macron administration’s innovative initiatives and limitations in integration governance, but also analyses the challenges and outcomes of practical implementation. It thereby provides reference points for an in-depth understanding of the institutional evolution of contemporary immigration policy, social integration practices and the transmission of republican values, alongside theoretical foundations and practical pathways for the future optimisation of public policy and governance improvement.

2. CIR Policy and its Formative Context

The “Republican Integration Contract” (CIR) is France’s “first integration contract” designed for non-European foreign immigrants who obtain their first residence permit. This instrument was not originally created by the Macron government; its predecessor was the “Reception and Integration Contract” (CAI), trialled in 2003 and rolled out nationwide in 2007. In 2016, the Hollande government formally repealed the CAI and established the CIR system by Act No. 2016-274, enshrining it in the Code on the Entry and Residence of Foreigners and the Right of Asylum (CESEDA). This marked French immigration policy’s shift from “reception management” toward “normative integration”. Nevertheless, the systemic overhaul carried out under Emmanuel Macron’s presidency truly granted the CIR its central institutional status. As Li Xingyu emphasises, the Macron government’s migration governance logic is embodied in the principle of “control and integration in parallel”, namely that “French interests must be protected. Substantively, this conception addresses migration issues through the dual lens of control and integration, while refining and supplementing relevant instruments according to field realities” (2022: 15). Within this macro-policy orientation, the CIR was progressively assigned clear political objectives and became a major state instrument for rebuilding social cohesion and national identity.

2.1. Status of CIR Policy under the Macron Government

Since Emmanuel Macron’s inauguration as President of the Republic in 2017, French immigration and integration policy has undergone a significant turning point: integration is no longer conceived as simple unilateral state assistance for immigrants, but rather as a bilateral contractual relationship. The government stresses that the CIR is more than an administrative document; it is a solemn commitment concluded between the newcomer and the French Republic, lending the policy a more assertive “republican” dimension and a political philosophy founded on the “reciprocity of rights and duties”. The central features of CIR policy during this period are its “high requirements” and its “binding character”. Pursuant to the “Act to Control Immigration and Improve Integration” (Act No. 2024-42), promulgated on 26 January 2024, the Macron government further strengthened the CIR’s legal status, explicitly establishing it as an absolute prerequisite for issuing a multi-year residence permit (Official Journal of the French Republic, 2024). Compared with earlier periods, the policy is far more results-oriented. According to the annual activity report published by the French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII), the government relies on the CIR to achieve two main goals: first, to guarantee through mandatory civic training that immigrants understand and adhere to the Republic’s fundamental values such as secularism, gender equality and the motto Liberty, Equality, Fraternity; second, to substantially raise language proficiency requirements (Paris: OFII, 2023: 154). It may be argued that, in the eyes of the Macron government, the CIR constitutes the first and most critical filter for selecting “qualified citizens”, with the aim of building a more cohesive French society.

2.2. Evolution of CIR Policy

The Macron government’s highly demanding framing of CIR policy did not emerge spontaneously. It represents a historical response to contemporary challenges forged through years of empirical practice and adjustment within France’s immigrant integration system. “Reception and Integration Contract” (CAI) introduced under Sarkozy in 2003. The CAI laid the groundwork for a “contractualised” model of integration governance. However, during implementation it long suffered from purely formal training, weak enforceability and insufficient language-learning outcomes. The renowned French demographer François Héran further notes that early integration policies often lacked precise assessment of immigrants’ real needs, leading to misallocation of resources (2017: 112). To remedy these shortcomings and reinforce social cohesion in the wake of the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, the Hollande government formally abolished the CAI and instituted the CIR through Act No. 2016-274 of March 2016 (Official Journal of the French Republic, 2016). This transition marks a fundamental qualitative leap in French migration policy: moving from simple “reception” toward deep “integration”, laying the legal foundations for the subsequent systemic reform undertaken by the Macron government.

Upon taking office, Emmanuel Macron judged that the 2016 version of the CIR still lacked robust enforcement. His government’s development of CIR policy revolved primarily around two major legislative initiatives and accompanying studies. First, the reform’s theoretical underpinnings drew largely from the report submitted to the Prime Minister in 2018 by deputy Aurélien Taché. In this document, he sharply points out that France’s low investment in language training directly leads to high unemployment and social marginalisation among newcomers (2018: 20–25). Drawing on this report, the Macron government pushed through the Act of 10 September 2018 “for controlled immigration, effective asylum rights and successful integration” (Act No. 2018-778), which redefined CIR content by doubling the maximum duration of French classes and strengthening employment orientation. Second, during his second presidential term, amid national identity anxieties and shifting political balances, the Macron government further hardened CIR policy via the new 2024 immigration law (Act No. 2024-42). It stipulates that signing the CIR is no longer an end in itself: passing a language exam at A2 or even B1 level becomes a mandatory criterion for residence permit renewal. CIR policy represents France’s institutional response to global migration flows, domestic security challenges and social fracture crises. By incorporating expert recommendations and carrying out continuous legislative adjustments, the Macron government has turned it into a precision mechanism combining language acquisition, value transmission and administrative control.

3. Pillars of CIR Policy Reform

Under Emmanuel Macron’s presidency, reform of the Republican Integration Contract (CIR) is not merely a technical adjustment of parameters. It is a systemic overhaul affecting governance logic, educational models and implementation modalities. Built upon the 2018 Asylum and Immigration Act and the new 2024 immigration law, this reform seeks to break from the old “welfarist assistance” logic and shift toward a new contractual governance model

emphasising the “reciprocity of rights and duties” and “employment orientation”. This chapter elaborates the reform’s content and innovative dimensions across three areas: language training, civic education and operational management.

3.1. Strengthened French-Language Training Provision

Language is the primary key to integration. The most notable reform Macron introduced to the CIR is the drastic increase in the intensity and requirements of French training, expanding its purely “cultural dimension” to make it an “employability tool”, thus framing it as a strategic state investment in immigrants’ human capital. Before the 2018 reform, the maximum prescribed duration of CIR language training stood at only 200 hours. Adopting recommendations from deputy Aurélien Taché’s report, the government established “enhanced language pathways”, raising the maximum hours to 400 and 600 respectively, and introduced a “targeted guidance mechanism” based on skills assessments carried out by the French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII). This customised model departed from a one-size-fits-all approach and substantially improved the conversion rate of public resources. As a France Stratégie study notes, tying residence rights to the intensity of language training responds to the objective need to raise immigrants’ “human capital”; it aims to break the cycle of persistent poverty caused by language barriers and constitutes an institutional empowerment guaranteeing newcomers’ “professional autonomy” (Paris: France Stratégie, 2019: 224).

At the same time, the reform radically transformed the prior assessment model, which prioritised “attendance over results”, by gradually tightening evaluation criteria. The new immigration law (Act No. 2024-42), enacted in 2024, explicitly requires attainment of A2 or even B1 level to obtain a multi-year residence permit; attendance alone is no longer sufficient. An even more critical innovation is the introduction of the “vocational French” module. This module integrates specialised terminology from labour-shortage sectors such as construction, catering and personal care into basic instruction, enabling a shift from simple sociocultural integration toward “pre-vocational training”. The objective is simultaneously to resolve the dual structural dilemma of high immigrant unemployment and national labour shortages.

3.2. Deepening Civic Education and Republican Values

Where language training emphasises an “instrumental” dimension, for civic education the Macron government insists on an uncompromising “principled” dimension. Faced with domestic security threats and identity crises, civic training within the CIR was assigned the political mission of defending republican values. The reform not only doubled civic training duration from 12 to 24 hours, but also drew a “red line” on fundamental values within its curriculum content. In particular, it no longer shies away from sensitive conflicts when laying out principles such as secularism and gender equality. In this regard, research published in the *Revue européenne des migrations internationales* (REMI) indicates that this Macron initiative marks a “civic turn” in French integration policy. Through contractualisation, it reinforces the exclusivity of the “republican pact”, transforming secularism from a legal principle guaranteeing plural freedoms into a decisive political and moral assessment

criterion determining whether an immigrant qualifies for substantive integration (2020, 36(4): 13–35).

To overcome the difficulty of internalising abstract values, the CIR also innovated civic education pedagogy, abandoning dry recitation of legal texts in favour of novel “scenario-based learning”. By designing concrete conflict scenarios (such as the wearing of religious symbols in public services or gender segregation within healthcare services), the programme guides immigrants to understand the boundaries between rights and duties in specific contexts. This pedagogical innovation translates abstract political concepts into tangible behavioural norms. Through concrete casework, it seeks to rebuild deep adherence to the republican pact among immigrant populations, thereby reducing social frictions arising from cultural misunderstanding.

3.3. Digitalisation and Synergy of Governance Mechanisms

To enforce these demanding language and value requirements, the Macron government equipped the CIR implementation system with comprehensive technological empowerment, building a data-centred digital governance ecosystem. For a long time, “siloe working” within French administration constituted a chronic obstacle to policy delivery. The major advance of this reform lies in establishing data-sharing and coordination mechanisms linking OFII, prefectures and France Travail (Paris: Court of Auditors, 2020). When an immigrant completes CIR training, their file is transmitted automatically, allowing prefectural officials to directly review their compliance record when examining residence permit renewal applications. This interministerial “ecosystemic synergy” breaks down barriers between the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Labour, creating a closed “integration–employment–residence” loop and enforcing effective administrative coordination via technological means.

Beneath this synergy lies the nationwide rollout of the “Digital Administration for Foreigners in France” (ANEF) platform. Using this platform, CIR signature, training bookings and assessment tracking are fully dematerialised throughout the whole process. The profound implication of this initiative is the creation of automated monitoring and control mechanisms, converting “soft integration performance” into “binding legal consequences”. Whenever the system detects non-compliance such as unauthorised absence or exam failure, it automatically triggers alerts for residence permit downgrade or refusal. This tight linkage between residence rights and the digital system marks the official entry of French immigration policy into a new era of granular, coercive algorithmic governance. While administrative efficiency has been unprecedentedly improved, it also sows seeds of potential equity problems in subsequent implementation.

4. Challenges of policy reform

Although the systemic overhaul of the Republican Integration Contract (CIR) undertaken under Emmanuel Macron substantially strengthened the binding force of this public policy, it inevitably generated numerous controversies and intractable dilemmas. These major challenges run through the entire policy cycle, from ideological design to field implementation. They manifest mainly in a profound alienation of the very concept of integration, marked

intensification of value conflicts, and inherent limitations of the administrative instruments deployed.

4.1. Contradiction between Social Integration and National Identity

While the Macron government's CIR reform ostensibly and vigorously foregrounds the concept of "integration" in political discourse and official rhetoric, careful observation of its operational and practical rollout reveals an undeniable clear tilt toward an assimilationist logic. As the noted migration scholar Patrick Simon aptly argues, French state integration policy has historically long rested on the theoretical foundation of republican universalism. Yet in practical implementation, this policy often imposes extremely stringent linguistic requirements on immigrant populations while unilaterally dictating axiological norms, which subtly erodes institutional tolerance for legitimate cultural differences (2012). This governmental rationality, treating residence rights as a veritable "bargaining chip" inextricably tied to language proficiency and value adherence, carries a high risk of triggering deep psychological resistance. Historian Gérard Noiriel rightly observes that when state institutions seek to define "what it means to be French" in an overly authoritarian and univocal manner, this approach produces a perverse effect: paradoxically, it reinforces feelings of marginalisation and victim mentality within immigrant communities (2016: 345). In particular, the implementation of unforgiving evaluation criteria keeps a segment of immigrants — who have resided in France for many years yet retain weak linguistic capacities — under permanent anxiety of sliding into "irregular status". This climate of chronic insecurity constitutes a major obstacle that severely undermines their capacity to develop genuine belonging to French society.

Furthermore, these stringent language and integration requirements effectively create an invisible social barrier and latent stratification threshold within the immigrant population itself. For elite immigrants holding higher education diplomas, passing CIR assessments is a relatively straightforward formality. By contrast, for the vast majority of working-class immigrants, often confined to manual labour and with much lower educational attainment, meeting the mandatory threshold (A2 or even B1) remains extremely difficult, even after completing the full maximum 600-hour training programme. Consequently, CIR policy objectively faces the major risk of becoming an "elitist selection tool", contributing to heightened polarisation within immigrant groups. This stands in stark paradox to the foundational principle of "equality" proudly upheld by the French republican model.

4.2. Tensions between Republican Values and Cultural Diversity

Within the civic training delivered under the CIR framework, the priority afforded to the Republic's founding principles — above all secularism — has reached an unprecedented level of insistence. Nevertheless, the challenge of firmly upholding these secular principles while fully respecting cultural diversity represents another substantial hurdle for practical policy application. In everyday training settings, some trainers or implementing bodies recurrently tend toward expansive, even defensive interpretations of secularism, wrongly equating it with targeted rejection of certain religious beliefs. Research published in the *Revue européenne des migrations internationales* (REMI) highlights

that establishing secularism as a genuine "civic evaluation criterion" risks giving immigrants from particular sociocultural backgrounds the unpleasant impression of being personally targeted. If public policy comes to excessively frame religious belief as an "insurmountable barrier to integration", this approach will not only fail to foster adherence, but may on the contrary open new fracture lines within already fragile intercommunity relations, feeding fertile ground for a dangerous resurgence of communitarianism.

Even more so, current CIR civic education is very often constrained by the twin pressures of limited teaching hours and assessment requirements, adopting a purely unilateral "teacher speaks, student listens" model. This deprives the pedagogical space of a framework for constructive intercultural dialogue. Within this formatted environment, immigrants' intrinsic cultural traditions are frequently treated as elements that must necessarily be "corrected", rather than legitimate components of a plural Republic. This mode of educational transmission, marked by a severe lack of cultural respect, is profoundly incapable of eliciting sincere axiological resonance among immigrant populations. The resulting outcome is often merely formal compliance — "docile assent in the classroom, only to revert to old habits at home" — a dynamic that conspicuously fails to achieve genuine internalisation of values.

4.3. The Gap between Policy Design and Implementation

Beneath the grand ambitions outlined in the overarching policy blueprint, on-the-ground delivery capacity, supporting logistical resources and technological threshold obstacles are often insufficient to fully sustain the Macron government's reform aspirations. Among these difficulties, the most salient issue is undoubtedly the "digital divide" created by digital transition. Although the government's vigorously promoted "Digital Administration for Foreigners in France" (ANEF) platform aims to boost administrative efficiency, this instrument entirely disregards the material reality of a considerable share of newcomers (especially refugees and elderly persons) who lack basic IT skills or adequate digital equipment. As the Defender of Rights sharply criticised in its incisive 2024 evaluation report, making CIR-linked residence permit applications fully subject to "dematerialisation" effectively erects a nearly impassable administrative wall for vulnerable publics, directly causing widespread prejudice and severe disruptions to residence rights (French Republic, 2024). This form of technological exclusion represents a clear violation of the sacrosanct principle of universal public service accessibility.

On the other hand, a marked imbalance between training supply and demand, paired with worrying heterogeneity in service quality, has substantially weakened the policy's tangible effectiveness. While new legislation substantially raised the ceiling for language-learning hours, a detailed report by the Court of Auditors stressed that state financial investment has not grown proportionally. The state apparatus suffers structural gaps in the overall coordination of resources allocated to reception and integration. To rationalise operational costs, implementing bodies frequently outsource language training to the lowest bidders. This inevitably results in precariously resourced teaching staff and poorly composed learner cohorts (such as classes grouping immigrants with diametrically opposed educational levels indiscriminately).

Owing to these multiple material constraints, massive investment in course hours has failed to translate into a meaningful rise in language pass rates, opening a vast, irreconcilable chasm between the noble intentions of policy design and the harsh realities of grassroots implementation.

5. Summary

Taking a retrospective, holistic view of the Republican Integration Contract (CIR) reform carried out throughout Emmanuel Macron's presidency, one can clearly observe profound transformation in the logic underpinning French migration governance. This shift marks France's undeniable move away from the traditional "reception management" model toward a modernised system built entirely on the notion of "contractual constraint". Through continuous legislative toughening, simultaneous raising of linguistic and civic standards, and broad technological rollout, the Macron government reshaped the CIR: from a preliminary administrative procedure, it was transformed into a powerful institutional instrument for selecting qualified migrants and staunchly defending the Republic's fundamental values. On one hand, tangible results of this reform are undeniable: the drastic expansion of language training hours, the introduction of employment-oriented modules and the adoption of an interministerial digital platform have collectively helped build a far more standardised, highly efficient system of integration with manifest coercive force, directly responding to French society's urgent demand for improved cohesion and security. Yet, as the rigorous analysis in this article reveals, this policy orientation combining "very high standards" and "strong constraint" inevitably generates structural challenges that cannot be ignored. Drastic evaluation indicators and the barrier of digital "dematerialisation" objectively exacerbate internal stratification among immigrant groups, exposing the most vulnerable, less educated and digitally illiterate segments to severe risks of administrative exclusion and societal marginalisation. At the same time, excessive focus on unilateral axiological adherence and an underlying assimilationist logic readily provoke deep psychological resistance within a multicultural environment, undermining the policy's inclusiveness.

Ultimately, the CIR overhaul steered by the Macron government constitutes an ambitious attempt, amid the complex interplay of global migration flows and national identity crisis, to seek a new political balance between "receptive openness" and "strict control". True social integration within a nation can never be exhausted or confined to simply signing a paper contract or cold numerical indicators. It requires not only inflexible legal constraints and algorithmic governance, but above all flexible social acceptance and mutual cultural respect. In the future, French immigrant integration policy must, while preserving the inalienable solemnity of republican principles, pay overriding attention to universal accessibility and the humanisation of implementation. Only by effectively bridging the wide dichotomy between macro-policy design and local resource

allocation, and by successfully marrying the technical efficiency of digital governance with compassionate human warmth, can newcomers cross the chasm separating mere "institutional residency" from "deep cultural identification". In the end, this will achieve lasting, harmonious coexistence between the cohesion of the French Republic and the richness of its cultural diversity.

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