



# Weekly Briefing

**Serbia external relations briefing:  
French President's visit to Serbia  
IIPE**

## China-CEE Institute

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## **French President's visit to Serbia**

### **Abstract**

*Adhering to its foreign policy goals, Republic of Serbia perpetually invests in maintaining good relations with leading European Union countries, especially those belonging to “the old Europe” circle. Some of those countries are even more important considering the historical ties and alliances created before world wars led in the XX-ieth century. France is among those countries. In that respect, it is not difficult to understand why recently visit of French President, Emmanuel Macron, has brought great attention. Part of the attention arose from the fact that it was first visit after Jacques Chirac's visit in 2001 while the other part is connected with perspective of Serbian future related to the EU accession process and conditions remained to be fulfilled.*

French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Serbia came after the cancellation of a summit in Paris scheduled for July 1. This summit intended to break the deadlock in negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina that has been blocked for months since Kosovo imposed 100 per cent import tariffs on Serbian goods. Therefore media have been speculating whether Kosovo might be the most important issue on the agenda of French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Serbia on July 15-16.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic's office announced day before visit that among topics that were planned to be discussed were political and economic cooperation, Serbia's EU perspective and Kosovo. It was also announced that during the visit, 20 interstate agreements will be signed.

Number of Serbian media reported about this visit underlining the 180 years of diplomatic relations between France and Serbia and should be mostly bilateral, with an emphasis on bilateral cooperation with new activities of the French Agency for Development (AFD) in the region, and bilateral trade.

Serbian National Television (RTS) announced that trade between Serbia and France will exceed one billion euros by the end of 2019. French companies have interests in IT, mining and infrastructure in the Balkan country. In the same manner spoke Frederic Mondoloni, French

ambassador to Belgrade, who told domestic media that he is hoping that during Macron's visit new contracts to exploit geothermal energy also could be signed.

Concerning the EU perspective, this visit expected to be thorny knowing Macron's hard line on potential new EU members from the Western Balkans. As Macron made clear in Sofia in May 2018 and then again by blocking the opening of accession negotiations for Albania and North Macedonia in June 2018, he was against any move towards enlargement on the grounds that the EU needed to reform before accepting any new member.

Along with expectations, there was no surprise neither the disappointment when, at a joint press conference, French President Emmanuel Macron warned Serbia that the EU cannot accept any new members until it has been reformed.

Macron said: "I have a sincere position – the EU does not function well with 28 member states, and we need to reform ourselves in order to make decisions faster, which is compatible with the Serbian approach to the EU", adding that the fact that a certain date hasn't been set shows responsibility, and that it is already accepted that Serbia will become a member when it is ready.

According to the French President, there shouldn't be any timetables. The EU accession process consists of a series of reforms, and this stage will be completed only when everything is implemented.

In that respect, Serbia should meanwhile stay on its EU course and undertake all necessary reforms, adding that the EU also needs to be ready to accept Serbia. As he noted: "The EU should make some decisions so it can function better."

Among the reforms, the interlocutors mentioned ones in the field of economics, the rule of law and structural changes. When asked about the new list of the unsatisfactory ratings presented in this year's European Commission Report on the state of the rule of law, freedom of the media, and independence of the judiciary, Macron said that all issues were openly discussed.

"In each area in which there are no satisfactory ratings, there needs to be improvement, and there is a desire for improvement among our interlocutors," Macron said, adding that some additional work needs to be done regarding media freedom and the cooperation with Reporters without Borders.

Turning to the dispute between Serbia and its former province of Kosovo – whose independence Serbia does not recognize – Macron announced that he will organize a meeting with high-level representatives of both countries and German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

“Serbia and Kosovo are European countries and we need to help to translate this into facts,” he stated, urging both sides to refrain from unilateral moves.

"We are seeing rising tension and sometimes these tensions are fuelled here and there by external powers that have an interest in making sure no deal is found," Macron said.

"Reaching an agreement implies that each party abstains from unilateral and non-constructive gestures and, in that respect, developments over the last few weeks have been a concern, and decisions that were against past commitments must be abrogated."

During joint press conference, President Vučić thanked his French counterpart for the support, arguing that there are few world leaders who are willing to listen to Serbia, despite disagreeing with it.

“I’m not naive to think that President Macron will change his stance, but I prayed for help in finding a compromised solution. We must accept that there are countries that differ vastly, and this is one of the few leaders, besides Angela Merkel, who wanted to hear us and help us out,” Vučić emphasized.

The Serbian and French presidents also discussed political and economic cooperation, signing 22 agreements, including an agreement on the delivery of Mistral surface-to-air missiles as well as a statement of intent on a project to build an underground railway in Belgrade.

Referring to Macron’s visit, some opposition figures expressed skepticism saying he was not there to advance Serbia's dream of joining the EU, but to make lucrative business deals for French companies. One of the major deals that France is eyeing is Belgrade's multi-billion-dollar underground metro project.

France was considered a front-runner in that race but on first day of visit there was an extra step taken, as both parts signed a letter of intent. According to Reuters, citing an official statement, the letter envisages negotiations on the possibility of concluding an intergovernmental agreement on the financing of the French part of the project's first phase.

Macron's visit was believed by some analysts to have another object, which was to rectify any rifts caused by the reported cool treatment of the Serbian president during a Paris event marking the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I.

During his visit to Belgrade, Macron visited several World War I related monuments and addressed the people gathered at Kalemegdan Park by reading a speech written in Serbian.

In WWI almost one-third of the entire population of Serbia was killed. Some historians hold that it was the final push of the Serbian army at the Salonica Front that broke the spine of the Central Powers and led to an end of the Great War.

Yet Serbia feels that it's significant and heroic role in the conflict has not been fully recognized. This sentiment was quite visible after the anniversary in Paris when the Serbian president was arranged to be seated in the back rows of the secondary stand. Serbians regarded it as a slap in the face.

## **Conclusion**

After Macron left Serbia, there were some mixed feelings in the country. Part of the people were delighted with the PR strategy and charm that the French president employed to keep Serbia as close as possible to the EU, while the other part think that he again insulted the host nation stated in Belgrade that Kosovo is an independent and neighboring country to Serbia.