



Weekly Briefing

**Poland external relations briefing:
Visit of the President of France to Poland
Joanna Ciesielska-Klikowska**


China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

Visit of the President of France to Poland

On February 3-4, 2020, the French President Emmanuel Macron's official visit to Poland took place. Although the politician has been holding this function for almost three years, it was his first visit to Poland. So far, bilateral relations have been limited to cooperation within the European Union, and the events of recent years, including the resignation from the purchase of French Caracal combat aircraft by Warsaw, have only deepened the divisions. Is Macron's visit to Poland a new opening in Polish-French relations? Or is it part of a wider game of the French leader?

The first day: meeting with highest political authorities

The program of the two-day visit of the head of the French state and his ministers was very rich. The visit began with an official welcome ceremony in the courtyard of the Presidential Palace in Warsaw, followed by the face-to-face talks of both Presidents, plenary talks of delegations and joint statements for the media.

The topics of talks between Polish and French leaders were primarily NATO, the situation in Ukraine, the future of the Weimar Triangle, as well as the policy of EU and NATO enlargement. During the visit, the heads of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Poland and France, in the presence of the Presidents of both countries, signed a program of Polish-French strategic partnership. Its main points are strengthening the political dialogue, joint consultations on important European policy issues, and cooperation to fortify Europe's security and defence within NATO, the European Union and the UN.

Speaking at a joint press conference, Presidents Duda and Macron emphasized that Poland and France should remain close partners. As the Polish President assumed: "The whole event is of great importance to us. I believe that it is a breakthrough in Polish-French relations, in particular by signing the cooperation program. A few days ago there was another breakthrough - Great Britain left the EU. France is a European power and its role after Brexit is undoubtedly increasing enormously. I am glad that in such a situation the President of France is taking his first steps towards us". Also French leader pointed out: "Leaving the Union through Great Britain is a period when a new era opens. Poland and France are closer than it would

seem. In terms of energy, security and defence, even more can be done. That NATO could have a greater efficiency, its troops must be more involved in operations”.

During the press conference the President of France also referred to the changes currently taking place in the Polish justice system, which provokes huge controversy in Europe (debates on the justice system and the rule of law have been conducted repeatedly in recent weeks, e.g. in the European Parliament and the European Commission). The French leader stated that he would like the dialogue with the European Commission to increase in the coming weeks: “In a conversation with President Duda, in the spirit of full openness we owe ourselves as European partners, I expressed my concern about the changes currently being introduced to justice. I would like the dialogue with the European Commission to intensify in the coming weeks. I know that in Poland, as its history shows, the values of freedom and justice are deeply rooted. Poland is a profoundly European country, and Poles are one of the most pro-European nations on the continent” Macron stated. According to the head of Polish diplomacy, Jacek Czaputowicz, this visit shows that France accepts the legitimacy of the authorities in Poland and that both countries are moving towards “normal relations”: “I hope that in the near future these relations will be strengthened in various dimensions and we will return to traditionally very good, strategic affairs between our countries”.

The first day of the visit included moreover talks with Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, Sejm Marshal Elżbieta Witek, and Senate Marshal Tomasz Grodzki. Prime Minister Morawiecki underlined afterwards, that: “The visit of the French President to Poland is groundbreaking; many of its elements open new chapters in the history of our relationship”. During meetings among ministers, talks were also held about defence and energy cooperation. The latter is a difficult issue for the entire EU, because the Polish government has stated several times that it does not want to refrain from obtaining energy from fossil fuels, which are the basis of the Polish energy sector. The visit of Macron and his government ministers to Poland (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Defence, Minister of Environment) was therefore to be a way of convincing Poland to change optics and strategic thinking aimed at the future and ecology. Macron promised he would not leave Poland alone with this problem.

The second day: speech at the Jagiellonian University

On the second day of the visit, a Presidential lecture was planned for students of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, the oldest academia in Poland. Before giving a lecture at the Collegium Novum, the President visited the Wawel Royal Castle.

The French leader began his long speech by recalling the rich history of Polish-French relations that date back to the 10th century. Yet, Macron focused primarily on the future and the challenges facing Europe. He underlined that in the coming years the fate of Europe will be defined by three challenges: security, climate and knowledge. According to his words, the scale of Europeans' involvement depends on whether the Old Continent will become a 21st century power.

Macron devoted the first part of his speech to history, in particular to the time of World War II and the crime of the Holocaust, whose counterfeiting he strongly opposed. Still, in the context of history, Macron also criticized other national historical revisionisms, e.g. what has happened in Poland in recent years. He confessed that he could not understand that in last years Poland has been trying to change the history of 1989: "We must defend a sound debate about our common history" he argued.

He also attempted to analyze the errors made in recent years by European political elites, including himself. According to Macron, relations between individual countries from the West and East of Europe have been incorrectly treated in recent years. He suggested that a necessary condition for building a strong Europe - apart from mutual understanding and respect - is a rethinking of the geography of the Old Continent, including first of all building a new neighbourhood policy.

Then he focused on EU matters. The Krakow speech did not lack criticism of a selective approach to the EU. Emmanuel Macron hinted that "Europe is not only a common market", and the "project Europe" should be treated holistically as a *Grand Design* serving the good of the entire Community, not of just selected countries.

Macron believes that only a united Europe can face the challenges of the future. The French president turned to the young generation, which in the coming years will take over responsibility for the European future: "It is your generation that will have to face this challenge. Our future will take place on a military and strategic plan. Europe's sovereignty must be redefined: both geographically and politically. You have to face these challenges" he argued. Macron strongly pointed out that the EU should rethink relations with its neighbours - especially Russia. This idea has been recalled many times in recent months since Macron would like to redefine the Brussels-Moscow relations.

The President's speech ended with a call for courageous action: "We should not repeat past mistakes. For France and Poland, Europe is the best choice to manage together. (...) We, as Poles and French, must believe in the future. We should be aware of our history. Let's

remember our joint achievements. We have achieved everything good. Let's think about those who built cathedrals, who rebuilt Europe after World War II. They were real dreamers. (...) Let you be dreamers who believe in the future" he concluded.

The importance of President Macron's visit to Poland

The visit of the French president to Poland was vital for the Polish political camp, because it emphasized Poland's importance in the EU and its strategic location, in particular in the context of relations with Russia and Ukraine. Significant were the President's statements about support for energy transformation in Poland and soothing words about changes in the judiciary system. Crucial was signing of the political strategic partnership.

Though, Macron's visit should be seen not only as a diplomatic gesture towards Polish politicians, but as a part of the broader plan of the French leader who finds himself in a difficult situation – protests of workers dissatisfied with the president's liberal policy in his own country do not cease; his critical words about the future of NATO (about the "brain death" of the organisation) also brought him many critics in the international milieu. An opportunity to improve his image may be a visit to Poland and talks with the most important politicians of the country on the future of the European Union.

In fact, from the beginning of his presidency, Macron has put a lot of emphasis on a closer unification of the euro zone countries around France and Germany, while marginalizing the "new Europe" ("two-speed Europe" project). In this scenario, countries such as Poland were only an obstacle that could be removed from the road by using arguments about violating the rule of law and reluctance to accept refugees. However, this project was unsuccessful due to Berlin's unwillingness to proposals made by the French President.

That is why Macron has adopted a different strategy recently. He tries to take advantage of Germany's weakness, linked to the political uncertainty of the end of Angela Merkel's era, to strengthen his own leadership in Europe. In this new puzzle, Eastern European countries count again, and earlier allegations lose their relevance, which is best demonstrated by Macron's increasingly better cooperation with Hungarian leader Viktor Orban.

For a long time, the French president has regularly visited the next capitals of the "new Europe" countries. The fact that he has so far delayed his visit to Warsaw can be explained by a political calculation: until the autumn 2019 elections it could be speculated that the authorities in Poland would change to the ones that would be more compatible with Macron's political

temperament. However, when this did not happen, Macron decided that one should not delay the incorporation of Poland into the new French project.

This, of course, does not mean that he counts on gaining the full support of Warsaw for his vision. Nevertheless, he may assume that, for example, at the price of concessions in other fields, he will soften the position of the Polish government regarding an agreement with Russia. This would make a potential reset in EU-Russian relations much more likely. In turn, including Poland in the European Intervention Initiative (Macron's military project outside NATO and EU structures) could attract other countries of the region to this venture. The latter, however, would require a significant reformulation of the objectives of this initiative. It can therefore be assumed that Macron's visit to Poland is just the beginning of a more intense cooperation.