



Weekly Briefing

Croatia external relations briefing:


**What the French presidential elections, hailed as a “significant win’
for Brussels,” mean for France’s bilateral relations with Croatia**

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Summary

On the 24th of April 2022, Emmanuel Macron was re-elected as president of France. This signifies the continuity of cooperation between France and Croatia. Nonetheless, considering the wider geopolitical and economic context and the domestic political situation in France, it is important to decipher how these factors may impact relations between these two countries during Macron’s second presidential term.

Introduction

In order to understand the way in which these electoral results may influence international relations between Croatia and France, it is important to consider the current nature of French politics.

Aforementioned, the results of the 2022 presidential elections in France saw the reelection of Emmanuel Macron. He secured 58.5% of the vote in the second round of voting against right-wing, nationalist Marine Le Pen¹. Nevertheless, the results demonstrate a substantial rise in support for the far-right in France. Indeed, 41.5%² of the electorate supported Le Pen, as opposed to the previous presidential elections, which were held in 2017, in which Le Pen secured only 33.9% of the vote. Therefore, these elections indicate that, despite his triumph, Macron’s popularity has decreased since 2017, when 66.1%³ of the electorate voted for the then-newcomer. Similarly, the electoral results illuminate the existing divisions within French politics which might define Macron’s second presidential term.⁴ The elections illustrate the tensions between “nationalist anti-establishment populists and centrist pro-European progressives.”⁵ However, the results also indicate that the far-left could also present challenges for the president. This is evident since, in the first round of voting, Jean-Luc Mélenchon secured

¹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/macron-re-elected-for-second-term-as-french-president-projection/>

² *ibid.*

³ <https://graphics.reuters.com/FRANCE-ELECTION/POLLS/zjvqkzlvx/>

⁴ <https://www.politico.eu/article/macron-re-elected-for-second-term-as-french-president-projection/>

⁵ *ibid.*

21.9% of the vote. When compared with Le Pen's 23.1% and Macron's 27.9%, it is clear that the trichotomy in French politics could prove difficult for the centrist president to manage⁶.

Macron's political strategy has been to occupy the centre of the political spectrum. He has aimed to represent the interests of those who do not entirely conform to either end of the political divide. Indeed, Macron has been described as a "double-liberal."⁷ His attitude towards issues, such as gay rights, are progressive⁸. However, he can also be described as a liberal with regards to the economy. For instance, he supports the "loosening of constraints on businesses."⁹ In this way, Macron's ideology encompasses some voters who would have traditionally positioned themselves on either the left or the right. His pragmatic approach has in many ways been successful and he himself has acknowledged that, in the most recent elections, many voted for him "not out of support for my ideas but to block those of the far-right."¹⁰ Therefore, for the time being, his tactic has been effective to an extent.

Nevertheless, this strategy is not without flaws. Macron's promise to appease the more moderate leftist and rightist voters initially secured a larger number of voters for him in 2017. However, as a result of this, he was expected to represent the interests of people on both sides of the political spectrum. For example, left-wing supporters of Macron were disappointed with his economic approach. His "decision to slash the wealth tax for France's richest citizens,"¹¹ angered many. In this way, Macron pushed these voters towards the more extreme Mélenchon, because they initially had greater expectations of the centrist president. One could argue that this is because of the way in which he was pitched in the presidential campaign. Indeed, in many ways, Macron had promised too much as a result of his attempt to perpetuate an all-inclusive, political narrative. Furthermore, this example illuminates how his political strategy during his first term had provoked certain voters and, in turn, pushed them towards his more extremist opponents on either side of the political spectrum. Aforementioned, this is also evident in Le Pen's rise in popularity.

⁶ <https://graphics.reuters.com/France-Election/Polls/zjvqk0mzlvw/>

⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-61153875>

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20220424-macron-beats-le-pen-again-as-france-rallies-once-more-against-the-far-right>

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-61153875>

Moreover, the upcoming parliamentary elections in June are ever-important for France. If Macron's party, *La République En Marche!* (*The Republic On The Move!*), does not secure the majority and the right, *Rassemblement National* (*National Rally*), or left, *La France Insoumise* (*France Unbowed*), do, Macron will face considerable challenges. In the case that *La République En Marche!* lose, Macron will have to 'cohabit' with a prime minister from a different party. This would certainly greatly restrict his presidential powers. Moreover, the results of the parliamentary elections are important because they may redefine France's foreign affairs and international relations. Nevertheless, for now, this continuity in French politics suggests that the nature of the country's foreign affairs will remain the same.

Relations between Croatia and France 2017-2022

Croatia and France enjoyed a strong, diplomatic relationship throughout Macron's first term as president. In 2021, Macron was the first French President to visit Croatia since its independence,¹² when a deal was signed between the two countries, in which Croatia bought twelve second-hand, Rafale fighter jets from France.¹³ Therefore, France enabled the modernization of the Croatian Airforce and helped enhance Croatia's "security and defense position."¹⁴ Prime Minister Andrej Plenković hailed the acquisition of these jets an ever-important step for Croatia. He explained that these modern fighter jets would greatly increase Croatia's role in maintaining and promoting political stability in Southeast Europe. However, this deal is also symbolically important for Croatia. Indeed, the French jets will replace Croatia's old, Soviet-era 1950s planes, thus signifying a symbolic break with Croatia's communist past.

Additionally, Macron has supported Croatia in the EU, upholding that the country "is ready for Schengen."¹⁵ His support is certainly valuable, since Croatia, having met 281 of the EU's criteria for its acquisition into the Schengen region,¹⁶ has demonstrated its determination to become a part of the region. Furthermore, it is clear that Macron and Croatia's intentions are compatible. Croatia's desire to consolidate its status as an EU-member and Macron's desire to "make that area (the Western Balkans) a genuine European region"¹⁷ means that Croatia and

¹² <https://www.predsjednik.hr/en/news/president-milanovic-meets-with-french-president-macron-procurement-of-fighter-jets-is-a-major-thing-for-croatia/>

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ <https://vlada.gov.hr/news/we-re-taking-the-next-step-in-our-relations-with-france-rafale-jets-a-game-changer-for-croatia/33443>

¹⁵ https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/macron-croatia-is-ready-for-schengen/

¹⁶ <https://www.etiasvisa.com/etias-news/croatia-schengen-area>

¹⁷ https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/macron-croatia-is-ready-for-schengen/

France share a common goal. Therefore, the re-election of Macron is advantageous for Croatia with regards to their cooperation with France.

How relations might be shaped from these elections, onwards

There are many difficulties which political leaders will have to face in the upcoming months, particularly with regards to the Ukrainian war and the impact that this has had on the economy. For both Croatia and Europe, the reelection of Macron is advantageous. This is because, the EU's response to Russian aggression will be more effective if there is intra-EU cohesion amongst the member states and they present a united front. Both France, under Macron, and Croatia have demonstrated their support for Ukraine and their willingness to impose economic sanctions on Russia. On the other hand, Le Pen, who has often perpetuated a pro-Putin sentiment and who openly criticised the imposition of energy sanctions on Russia¹⁸, would have certainly weakened this EU front and, thus, negatively impacted on France's foreign relations. Le Pen's narrative maintains that imposing energy sanctions on Russia "would be far too costly for French households."¹⁹ While, she does not perpetuate sympathy for Putin and has advocated her willingness to impose other economic sanctions on Russia,²⁰ aforementioned, it is in the EU's interest to minimize discussions and disputes regarding their approach in responding and reacting to the war. Furthermore, in light of the Ukrainian crisis, the reelection of Macron has created a sense of ease for both the EU and Croatia.

¹⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-61073894>

¹⁹ <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-703933>

²⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-61073894>

Conclusion

For Croatia, a smaller European country, having an ally like France is important and beneficial. Following Macron's victory, Plenković congratulated him on his reelection and stated that the outcome is good news 'for France, for Europe and for Croatia and France's strategic partnership and the continuation of bilateral relations between the two countries'²¹. Similarly, Croatian President Zoran Milanović congratulated Macron, noting that "Croatia and France are linked by friendly and allied relations."²² These two statements embody the nature of French and Croatian relations, which are characterized by mutual support and cooperation. One should certainly anticipate the continuation of Macron's attitude towards and his willingness to work with Croatia. With regards to the current global context, both countries have a similar stance on Ukraine. Therefore, with the defeat of Le Pen in the presidential elections, there is no reason to doubt that France and Croatia will continue to work together as they have done thus far.

²¹ <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/hrvatska/plenkovic-macronova-pobjeda-dobra-za-eu-francusku-i-hrvatsku-6959493>

²² <https://www.predsjednik.hr/en/news/president-milanovic-congratulates-french-president-macron-on-election-victory/>